THE HOUSE IN GREEK STREET



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SYDNEY HORLER

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HODDER AND
STOUGHTON
LTD., LONDON

THE HOUSE IN GREEK STREET

WITH
THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP, MEN IN MASKS, and THE CLEAN WINEGLASS

SYDNEY HORLER



HODDER AND STOUGHTON

First Printed - - - *January, 1935*
Reprinted - - - - *April, 1936*

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary, and have no relation to any living person

Made and Printed in Great Britain for Hodder & Stoughton Limited
by Wyman & Sons Limited, London, Reading and Fakenham

To

Those Faithful Fans,

Mr. and Mrs. F. G. H. SALUSBURY,

with the Author's Best Salaams

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THE HOUSE IN GREEK STREET

CHAPTER ONE — "THE PRIEST" PASSES

RAESIDE stiffened to attention. He felt as though an electric bell was ringing somewhere inside him.

Scattered about him were the derelicts of the night. Some sprawled on the adjacent seats, others shuffled past, eyeing him with mingled suspicion and professional interest, leaving their reek behind.

"Good evening."

The man had stopped after making his second tour. He was perhaps fifty-five years of age; soberly and respectably dressed in a well-cut dark overcoat topped by a bowler hat. Beneath the brim of this ultra-conventional headgear thin, ascetic features showed. He had the pallor of one who lives much indoors.

The Priest . . . !

Inside his overcoat pocket Raeside clenched his hands. His temporary lack of nerve-control was excusable—here, standing before him in the flesh, was the very man for whom he had been combing the lowest floors of the underworld for the past month.

It was this sense of excitement which kept him silent. His thoughts went racing back to the interview he had had with Sir Harker Bellamy, Chief of the Q.1 Department of the Secret Service, on that cold, murky November morning.

Bellamy, the hardest taskmaster in the whole of the British Intelligence, had barked out his orders.

"We can't expect the police to help us . . . this is our concern. Somewhere in the Soho underworld there is a criminal they call 'The Priest.' Find him, for I believe he is at the back of this affair."

That had been all. Bellamy did not waste words. He gave an instruction and expected it to be carried out. He never listened to recitals of failure, and gave little praise even when this had been richly earned. In short, he had few human attributes—but those who worked under his banner swore by "The Mole," which was his nickname in that cul-de-sac off Whitehall where he sat like a spider weaving webs for the enemies of his country to step into them.

"You must excuse me speaking to you," the voice continued.

Raeside sat up.

"It's all right," he mumbled in the whining tone of the down-and-out he was impersonating. "But what do you want to speak to me for?"

The other took a seat by his side.

"I will explain," he said in a voice that seemed to hold nothing but consideration. "I live near by, and I like to do what I can for the people like yourself, who have fallen by the wayside. I come here every night—here in this little garden of Leicester Square, the centre of London's gaiety and entertainment, sin, wickedness—and want. I do not intend to talk religion to you—I will merely say that I

would like to help you. That is, of course," he added quickly, " if you will permit me to do so. I should hate you to think that I wanted to intrude upon your private affairs. But all the same," his voice rising to a more resonant note, " according to my poor means I should be happy to render you any assistance in my power."

Again excitement kept Raeside silent. Should this man be " The Priest "—and he approximated pretty well to the description given him of the arch-criminal he was tracking—then it would be the uttermost folly to listen to his specious words. The risk of going with this man to his " home near by " was simply appalling. He had heard enough about " The Priest " in the vestibules of hell through which he had passed during the last few weeks to realise this acutely.

And yet, now that Chance had stopped to throw him a smile, was he going to neglect this marvellous opportunity ? For a month he had searched . . . and found no tangible clue.

The next second he had made up his mind. The thought of danger he thrust resolutely behind him, reassuring himself by the reflection that he could not possibly have been recognised owing to the many disguises he had adopted.

" It is very kind of you." He hoped excitement did not show too clearly in his voice.

" Some men were born into this world to render service ; I like to think myself one of that happy band."

It was strange, but the words rang convincingly true. They did not smell either of humbug or rant. Perhaps the voice itself

helped, for it was a voice that a great actor would have been proud to possess. A beautiful voice, holding kind, caressing notes.

"Come, my young friend."

Raeside felt a hand on his arm. Then came disquietude. For, even through the thick cloth of his shabby overcoat, he felt that the flesh of the other burned against his . . .

"When did you eat last, may I ask?"

"Two days ago." He had to lie. For, now that he had taken the first step, he must continue to foster this man's sympathy, and he must keep true to his character as a starving derelict—one with the creatures that once perhaps had been men whom he now saw crouched on the near-by seats.

"We will take a taxi—it will be too far for you to walk."

If he shook off the other's hand, his prospective benefactor might be offended; so, with the grip that he found so hateful still on his arm, he walked the few yards that separated them from the taxi rank on the side of the square nearest Piccadilly Circus. As he went he heard the sound of laughter and merriment coming from the top floor of a big building. With a swift stab of memory, he realised that the members of the Green Room Club were holding revels—entertaining an honoured guest, perhaps. He thought of the wonderful night he had once spent in their merry midst, and recalled with an acute sense how deep was the gulf that separated his former self from the man who was now going—*where?* For during the past month he had appeared to live through the

many phases of some wild, disordered dream, scarcely touching reality for a single moment. He had undertaken many commissions since joining Sir Harker Bellamy's staff—but none had been so thoroughly unnerving as this present job. And yet he had to make good on it. "The Mole" was relying on him; he could not let the little grey man down.

His companion raised his stick and a taxi-driver started up his engine. The door of the cab was held open and he stepped into its darkish interior. He had taken the plunge; from now on he must be prepared to face possible death at any moment. He knew it to be no exaggeration when he reflected that the length of his life would depend upon the quickness of his wit; for, by the time the older man had joined him in the taxi, Raeside had no further doubt that this master-actor was the very person he had sworn to trace and, if needs be, kill!

Strength was given to this impression when he saw the taxi turn up by the Empire Cinema and then plunge into the maze of sordid streets which make up Soho. During the past month, in which, at the constant peril of his life, he had toured the by-ways of this crime-ridden district, he had got to know every alley in the place, and when the taxi stopped he knew himself to be in Greek Street.

It was a tall, forbidding, sombre-looking house outside of which his companion alighted—one of the few survivors from the day when Soho was a high-class residential district.

"Here we are," came the announcement. "I'll just pay the taxi."

During the few seconds that he had to himself Peter Raeside did some further intensive thinking. The Scots blood which had descended to him from his father warned him to be cautious; but the Irish, a legacy from his mother, urged him, on the other hand, to carry on with the adventure.

He compromised by pledging himself that once inside the house he would be doubly cautious.

But there was not the least sign of anything suspicious when he stepped into the modestly-carpeted hall and walked through a door on the right which his host held open.

This room, with its worn, shabby furniture, looked equally harmless, and its comfort—there was a cheerful fire burning on the hearth, whilst the table was already laid for a substantial meal—was doubly appealing after the intense cold of the outside world.

"This is my little haven. This is where I dispense such hospitality as my means will allow. Take off your overcoat, my dear fellow, and sit down. As you can see, supper is already waiting."

The words, pleasantly uttered, were fully in keeping with the room, and Raeside's taut nerves might have been sufficiently soothed to accept the invitation had not his eyes caught, just at that moment, a glimpse of a phenomenon: a small section of the wall to his left had opened, leaving a sort of grille, and through this spy-hole he noticed quite distinctly a pair of venomous eyes regarding him with intense curiosity. Then, whilst he continued to

watch, the grille disappeared, for the wall to resume its former solidity. The whole thing had happened so quickly that he might very well have believed that it was an hallucination due to his overwrought nervous condition.

But he knew that he had not been deceived: those eyes had been staring malevolently at him, and there was only one conclusion to be drawn: that in entering this house he had placed himself in very real peril.

Ruled by the first instinct of a captured animal, he swung round to the door.

"My dear boy, what is the matter? Anyone might think that you were afraid of me."

He turned to look at the man, whose voice, tinged with a mild contempt, was issuing a challenge to him.

His manhood reasserted itself. He was convinced by this time that the speaker was the quarry he had so earnestly sought—the man Sir Harker Bellamy had commissioned him to find.

The knowledge gave him a new strength. He had succeeded—and what did it matter if he had been helped by good fortune? A man had to have luck if he was to come to the end of a difficult task.

"I'm sorry," he apologised. "I was thinking that I ought not to take advantage of your kindness in this way."

"Nonsense! Sit down and eat. Haven't I already told you it gives me pleasure to help the lame dogs I find wandering about? What do you think of my quarters?"

"This room is certainly very comfortable."

By this time, at the urgent touch of the man's hand on his arm, he was seated at the table. His host took up a carving knife and fork and commenced operations on a sirloin of cold beef.

"I'm a bachelor and I have just two rooms here," his host continued. "This house, which was once the town mansion of a great merchant, has fallen from its proud estate and is now let out in apartments. There are some funny characters living here, but they never interfere with me. They know," with a smile, "that I'm quite harmless—that, for instance, I should never think of passing on any information that may come to me. . . . Now, eat this, and I'll get you a hot drink."

The cold had made him hungry, and Peter, feeling certain that this food could not have been interfered with, proceeded to do such justice to the *al fresco* meal that his benefactor beamed his pleasure.

"And now for the hot drink," he said. "There's nothing like a strong whisky for keeping out the cold. The water won't be long boiling."

He put a small kettle on the fire and sat in a chair by the side of the hearth, alternating his glances from his guest to the kettle, from the spout of which steam soon issued. By the time Raeside was three-quarters of the way through his meal—he ate ravenously, to keep up the impression of a starving man—a steaming glass of hot whisky and water—"with a slice of lemon added for luck," to quote his host's words—was by his side.

"Drink it up: it will do you good," he was urged.

"Thanks—but I'll finish this beef first; it's delicious."

Raeside now ate slowly, as though the edge had been taken off his appetite. He had to have time. The food had not been doctored, but he was willing to bet a hundred pounds to a penny that the whisky would not have come through any analysis with a clean bill of health. He had snatched a brief impression of the man's face as the self-styled philanthropist stooped to put the small kettle on the fire.

That one look had been revealing. It fitted in well with the swift glimpse he had had of the pair of venomous eyes watching him through the grille.

Quickly an idea sprang into his mind.

And as it did so, a knock sounded on the door.

CHAPTER TWO THE WOLF SHOWS HIS TEETH

WATCHING, Raeside saw his host frown. The look of displeasure strengthened as the knock came again.

"Excuse me," he said; "I shan't be a minute. Drink your whisky and help yourself to another one."

"Thanks."

But, directly the door was closed behind him, Peter began to look round for some place where he could throw this drink, which he felt certain had been doctored. He must get rid of it by some means, even if he were watched. For this idea which had come to him so swiftly must be acted upon. Upon the success of the manœuvre, so far as he could see, rested his only chance.

It was not until his eyes had roamed all round the room and had come back to their starting point that he saw what he wanted. The mantelpiece, when the house was in its prime, must have been exceedingly handsome, and even now it retained some shadowy splendour. It had a broad ledge, and on this was a small copper bowl—the kind of thing some men use for an ash-tray.

With the glass in his hand, Raeside walked over to it. Yes, the bowl was used as a smoker's aid—there were several dead cigarette ends already in it. . . .

Turning to see if he were still being watched by the spyhole observer, he tilted the glass and watched its contents swirl round the cigarette stubs, which commenced to disintegrate. Then, still holding the glass, he staggered—for he had now to put in the best bit of acting of his life—over to the chair on the left of the fire-place.

No sooner had he seated himself than from his apparently nerveless fingers the tumbler slipped. It did not break, because the glass was so heavy, but the noise it made on the thinly carpeted floor was considerable.

Nothing happened. Peter, questioned, could scarcely have told what he expected to happen. It was ridiculous lying back in that chair, starting to act a part without an audience. The deep silence continued. It struck him as being strange—strange and sinister. If this large house was let out into apartments, as the man had stated, surely there would be some sound? The place might have been a tomb. Still, the only thing for him to do was to wait, and so wait he did—with every minute of inaction making a further call upon his already exhausted nerves.

In the meantime, that almost legendary figure whom the whole of London's underworld knew as "The Priest" was engaged in a very earnest conversation.

In the dim and forlorn-looking hall outside the room where he was entertaining Peter Raeside, he had encountered his present chief of staff. Poland Jack (to identify a crook in

the underworld you have to give him his nickname), a heavily built, fashionably dressed man with loathsome eyes, was excited. He waved his beringed hands and became almost incoherent.

"What did you bring that fellow back here for?" he croaked. "Don't you know——?"

He was sharply interrupted.

"I know something else besides that, Poland: I know that if you can't keep off the 'snow' you and I will soon part company."

"Yes—but listen to what I'm going to say. That fellow has been hanging around Soho for the past month; he's a 'split'—and yet you bring him back here—*here!*" he repeated.

The thin, ascetic features flushed. No longer could "The Priest" be said to have the face of a saint: he was more devil than man at that moment.

"I know my own business," he retorted, and, turning on his heel, left the other glowering after him.

Peter stared dully at the man as he entered.

"Why——?" started his host; and then: "What has happened, my dear fellow?"

It seemed that the other had difficulty in speaking; words rose in his throat only to die on his lips. Finally, as though any further effort was too much, he sank back in the chair, gave a short, stifled grunt, and remained very still.

Raeside was conscious that the man's eyes were fixed intently on him; although he could not see them, they seemed to be able to read

every thought he had. He felt sick—and very much of a fool.

He heard the other walking across the room and sensed that he was making his way to the fire-place. If he should look in that copper bowl . . . ! What an ass he had been ! Why, "The Priest" would be able to smell the stuff . . .

There was now a silence—a stillness so profound that it seemed to Peter that the other must be able to hear the beating of his heart.

Then :

"So you didn't trust me, Mr. Raeside ? "

The bomb had been thrown, the challenge issued. Peter was instantly on his feet. He might have tried to act a little longer, but he was tired of pretence and his whole body ached for action.

He looked at the man, whose thin lips were twisted into a cynical smile.

"Now I'll ask *you* one, Mr. Priest."

"So—you know me ? "

"I've been hunting you for the past month."

The other nodded. With his left hand he took from a waistcoat pocket a small platinum case. Opening this, he extracted a cigarette.

"That's just the reason I'm going to kill you," he stated calmly.

The next instant Raeside had rushed forward. An insane possession had controlled his mind ; he would render "The Priest" unconscious and drag the body into the street . . .

But the other had already made his plans. As he had stood with his back to the fire-place, his right hand had sought the button of a bell. This he had pressed . . .

Before the young Secret Service man could swing his right arm, a numbing blow descended on his head from behind, and, staggering forward, he fell headlong into a darkness whose depths seemed infinite.

How long he had been unconscious he could not tell, but he came out of that stupor to find "The Priest" looking down at him as he lay on a cold, hard floor that smelt of damp.

"I have waited because I think it only fair that you should know exactly what is coming to you, Raeside," declared his enemy without any preamble. "Immediately prior to contemplating a brutal assault upon me just now, you condemned yourself out of your own mouth—you admitted, in other words, having hunted me for over a month. Well, seek and ye shall find: never has the promise been more abundantly fulfilled! But the fact of having found me will not, I think, assist you much."

The speaker broke off to go to the door.

"*Kuhn!*" he called.

What little hope Peter may have felt before was utterly destroyed by the sight of the creature who came shuffling into the room. He was a gigantic negro, massive of shoulder, from which hung terrifically long arms. The fellow was shuddersome, and, to add to his horror, one side of his face was . . . what had happened to it? The illumination given by the oil lamp hanging from the low roof of this cellar (for such his prison proved to be) was poor, yet it enabled him to get a clear view of an eyeless

socket and a cheek that looked as though it had been clawed by some jungle beast. . .

"This is your warder, Raeside," announced "The Priest." "He is very strong and quite devoted to me—aren't you, Kuhn?"

The huge mouth split open and a harsh, deafening cataclysm of laughter issued.

"Yes, boss—what you says goes with me," the creature declared.

"I was instrumental in saving Kuhn's life; he was destined for the electric chair—what the Americans, with their gift of vivid idiom, call the 'hot squat'—in Sing-Sing Prison, and he has been most absurdly grateful to me ever since. You will find him somewhat difficult to manage if he is provoked."

There was a wealth of cynical meaning behind the speaker's smile. In that moment Raeside knew that all the fantastic stories he had heard about "The Priest" must be true—here was a man utterly without conscience or any trace of human feeling.

"Have you nothing to say?" went on the speaker.

Peter's mouth was parched, but he managed a reply.

"It would be very interesting to me to know what further nonsense you have to add. You realise, of course, that you have taken an unwarrantable liberty in treating me like this?"

His interrogator smiled again.

"So you're trying to bluff it out—well, here are a few additional facts which you can digest at length when I leave you, as I expect to do shortly. Your name is Peter Raeside and you

are an agent employed in the Q.1 branch of the British Secret Service. The head of that branch is a man named Sir Harker Bellamy. Correct so far ? "

Raeside gave no reply. This man must have an uncanny intelligence system of his own in order to have gained so much information.

The suave voice continued :

" For reasons best known to himself, it appears that this man Bellamy instructed you to seek me out, and for that purpose you have spent the past month or so in what the more sensational newspapers are apt to term ' the Soho underworld.' I suppose you are anxious to know something about the man Lessing ? " He turned to look at the gigantic negro. " When I am gone, Kuhn, you may enlighten the gentleman."

A gale of gargantuan laughter greeted the words. This coloured monstrosity appeared to think it the most exquisite joke.

" And now," concluded " The Priest," a note of regret in his voice, " I am afraid I must leave you. There are various other matters requiring my immediate attention. But I shall see you again to-night. In the meantime," waving his hand, " I leave Kuhn in charge."

As the speaker turned away, Raeside tried to rise from the reeking floor ; but the blow he had received on the back of his head had done its work too surely ; he was still a physical wreck ; he must continue to wait—although what chance he would have in a hand-to-hand tussle with this Hercules of a negro, who must have weighed at least eighteen stone of sheer

bone and muscle, it was waste of time to conjecture. He was trapped like a rat in a hole, and for the time being his only source of satisfaction was the knowledge that he was still alive. That treacherous attack from behind might well have finished him.

Apart from a packing-case, which the negro moved forward with his right foot, there was no furniture of any kind in that cellar, and when he had manœuvred the case to his satisfaction Kuhn appropriated this solitary seat.

"Now, so long as you keep nice and quiet, there's no reason why we shouldn't be the best of friends, mister," he stated in a rich, guttural voice. "But you heard what the boss said: I'se in charge and I'se being held responsible. What you want to come butting in here for, anyways?" he continued, pulling a stump of a cigar out of the sleeved waistcoat that he was wearing and striking a match on the side of the wooden packing-case.

Raeside, feeling that his strength was returning every minute, told himself he must be patient. Presently, perhaps, the luck might change—and chance would give him an opportunity. In the meantime he must still pretend to be down and out.

"I feel sorry for you, mister," went on his warder. "I feel sorry for anyone who makes the boss lose his temper. I'll tell you this: when the boss really loses his temper . . . why," puffing out a great cloud of pungent cigar-smoke, "things ain't none too pleasant for the party concerned. Now," waving his hand like an orator—it was plain to see that Kuhn

loved to hear the sound of his own voice—" there's the case of this Mister Lessing——"

Lessing !

At this second mention of the name he felt that all the risks he had taken had been well worth while. When " The Priest " had spoken the name he decided that the man had been merely trying to draw him out, to goad him to betray what was in his mind—but now . . .

" Yes, suh, Mister Lessing is feeling right down sorry for himself, I calculate. You see, he had some information which the boss wanted, but he was obstinate—yes, suh, he was obstinate. So what did the boss say ? He just said ' Give him de works, Kuhn,' and I gave dat Mister Lessing de works—de whole of de works. Hah ! hah ! "

Raeside shuddered. He knew he was listening to stark tragedy, for the horror of the recital was emphasised by the simplicity of the speaker's words.

He could not control himself.

" Do you mean that you tortured him, you swine ? "

The childish pleasure with which the negro had told his tale was replaced by a glare which rendered his mauled features malignantly evil.

" Excuse me, mister, but that ain't the way to speak to me, suh. The boss says to me : ' Kuhn,' he says, ' give dis Mister Lessing de works,' and I gave him de works—de whole works. That was jes' mah job, suh."

Peter said no more. Everything was abundantly clear. " The Mole's " prognostication had proved correct, then : Lessing, the

man who had fled to England from Ronstadt with information vital to the safety of Great Britain, had been captured by "The Priest," who must be in the pay of England's enemies, and, because he would not come through with his secret, had been tortured.

He had to know more.

"Where is Mr. Lessing now?"

Kuhn had recovered some of his amiability.

"He's right near you, suh—in de next cellar—but he ain't a pretty sight. I don't think as how he's going to live long. You see, de boss said to me: 'Kuhn, give him de works . . .'"

"Stop it!" Raeside's nerves could stand no more.

"But you asked me, suh."

"Oh, get to hell out of here!" Having to stay another minute in that fiend's presence, watching him placidly smoking his rank cigar, was sufficient to drive him mad.

"Now don't you get excited, suh—and you stay right where you are. On dat floor. Because de boss said to me—well, suh, you heard what de boss said: 'I leave you in charge, Kuhn.' That means that you've got to stay right where you are."

Peter slipped back on the wet floor. Although he felt better, he knew that he did not possess sufficient strength yet to put up any kind of a battle with this monster.

"De boss has been very good to me, so I naturally always does what he tells me. I'se——"

Then he swung round on his seat, for the door behind him had opened. Swaying on the threshold was another nightmare figure—a

fashionably dressed man with fat jowls and eyes that were blazing with an insensate light.

"Get out of here, Kuhn," this stranger cried.

Like some gigantic animal, the negro rose from the packing-case.

"You ain't got no right to speak to me like that, Mr. Jack," he replied. "De boss he put me in charge of this gen'leman, and I'se responsible for him."

"Get out of my way, you blasted nigger!" The intruder, who seemed to Raeside to be crazed either by drink or dope, thrust a hand into his pocket and brought out a revolver. "Get out of my way, you bloody nigger," he cried again, "or I'll plug you."

Kuhn swayed like a human cobra preparing to strike.

"Now put that popgun away, Mr. Jack . . ." He flung himself sideways as the man's face became even more distorted—and the bullet buried itself in the wall on the opposite side of the cellar. But he could not get at the man before the latter fired again; Raeside saw the negro crumple up as though the hand of Fate itself had struck him. With a harsh, savage cry he slumped to the ground.

"And now, you cursed spy, I'll finish you, too!"

But Poland Jack spoke in his haste. The fierce, if brief, drama which had taken place before his eyes had roused Peter to action. Here was a man more his own weight, and, moreover, the knowledge that the negro could take no further part in the proceedings nerved him to a supreme effort. He realised that this

was a God-sent chance and he must make the most of it.

"I'm going to shoot your heart out, you blasted spy——"

That was as far as his opponent could get, for, with a rush like a Rugby forward, the Q.1 man had sprung at his knees. Together they crashed to the floor, and such was the force of Raeside's impetuous charge that the gun fell out of his foe's hand, to clatter reassuringly against the damp stones. The consciousness that he had to fight for his life gave Raeside a strength that he would not have believed possible a few minutes before. The unwieldy bulk of his opponent soon collapsed like a pricked balloon—the man must have been living soft for years, his only stimulus being of the drink or drug variety—and within a couple of minutes of his entering the room Poland Jack was out of action.

CHAPTER THREE — THE TORTURED MAN

His breath coming in great gulps, Raeside staggered upright. At his feet the ungainly form of Poland Jack remained still. He had won that short, if vicious, fight.

The reflection did not give him much pleasure; he still felt soiled at having to manhandle such a mess of unpleasant flesh.

The important fact was that he was alone—if only temporarily. Before him and the door which led to sanity and the outside world there were many barriers, no doubt; but, as some of the torture went out of his lungs, he rejoiced that for the time being he was a free agent.

But he must be quick; at any moment the negro Kuhn might recover consciousness (he was only stunned, apparently, from the effects of a bullet that had shaved the top of his skull) or some other creature of "The Priest" might come into the room. Yes, he must hurry.

He stood for a moment irresolute. Strange that the uncanny silence which he had remarked on before should continue; it was as though he were wrapped about by a thick curtain that cut him off from the normal noises of the living. Then he remembered; the one fact that had struck him during his tour through the anterooms of the underworld was the silence with which the crook surrounded himself and his

doings. Why, his average speech did not rise above a whisper. . . .

He had the chance to get away—to return to that world of normality which was his by rights. Let someone else carry on with the job of trying to trace Jacob Lessing.

The flash of the man's name across his mental consciousness was enough; he knew that his comfortable rooms in the Adelphi would not know him until he had fulfilled his mission to the last letter and the last ounce of his strength. He could visualise the expression on "The Mole's" face if he reported that he had thrown up the sponge because his nerve had failed. . . .

Here was his big chance—if only he could pull it off; he might become the No. 1 man of the Department. It was a thrilling thought.

He *must* pull it off; somewhere in that house, if that negro torturer were to be believed, was Lessing. He must find him—and before it was too late.

Kuhn shifted his gigantic frame as he stepped to the door. It was a reminder that he must hurry. . . .

Opening the door, he looked out. There was no one in the chilling passage which ran for some distance to the right. How deep underground he was he could not say, but he guessed that the cellar which had served for his prison was right in the bowels of the earth.

On the opposite side of the passage, but more to the right, was a door, and from this, as he stood hesitant, came a sound that brought an added jolt to his nerves and set his heart

racing again. Someone in that second cellar was on the borderline either of madness or death. . . .

For just one more moment Raeside waited. Kuhn and the other man had to be kept in the room; he didn't desire any further interference from them.

His eyes went to the lock. There was a key. He turned it quickly, put the thing in his pocket and rushed across the passage.

He found himself in a cellar that was smaller than the one he had left—and the stench that greeted him as he thrust the door aside nearly knocked him backwards. The refuse of years must have been placed in it.

Overcoming his sense of nausea, he concentrated on the object he saw in the far corner. Lying on what appeared to be a bundle of sacks was a half-naked figure. A fresh whimpering cry came from it as he approached, so dreadful to hear that Peter felt his heart swell with pity.

"It's all right," he whispered; "I'm a friend."

Now he was able to see, first, that it was a man lying there, and secondly, that he had been foully and abominably used. The torture to which he had been put was so revolting that Raeside was afraid at first that he would commence jittering himself.

"De boss said 'Give him de works,' and so I gave him de works—de whole works."

The words of Kuhn, the human monster, came back with a terrible significance.

The man was dying—so much was plain. Just as clear was this fact, indeed, as was the consciousness that this poor, tortured wretch was Jacob Lessing!

How to get him away? That was the question. But a second look told him the thought was utterly impossible. The life of this man was ebbing fast; he could only have a few minutes to live in any case.

Raeside dropped to his knees and looked into the glazed eyes.

"You're Lessing, aren't you?" he asked; and then, as the blood-flecked lips quivered: "It's all right, as I told you before—I'm a friend; I'm from Q.I——"

"Bellamy?" The name was so faintly uttered it was scarcely audible.

"Yes, Bellamy. My name's Raeside; I've been searching for you for over a month——"

"I've been here . . . that devil . . . 'The Priest' . . ." A spasm of fear shook the horribly maltreated body and the words stopped.

Peter had to know more. It was vitally important that he should know more.

"Have they got anything from you?"

The head was shaken and the merest wraith of a smile flickered in Lessing's eyes for a moment.

"Nothing—that's why . . ."

If only he had some brandy, or some other stimulant! To have touched the tortured man would have brought fresh agony to him—and yet he had to try to give Lessing some hold on life if only for a few minutes. For this man, whose end was so near, had a secret locked in his brain which

was essential to the future safety of England. Lessing, from whose mother he got his English sympathies, had been acting as an agent of Q.1 in Pé, the capital of Ronstadt, for several years. The information he sent "The Mole" for a period covering several months had been invaluable, for, although the two nations were nominally at peace and outwardly the best of friends, yet Ronstadt, by her actions, had placed the other European nations on edge, and the danger was that if hostilities broke out between her and her traditional enemy, Caronia, Britain might be dragged in. Consequently, it was vitally important that first-hand, reliable information concerning what actually was taking place in Ronstadt, ruled now by a man whose flaming egoism knew no bounds, should be received by Sir Harker Bellamy and those associated with him.

Jacob Lessing was a brave man; although for certain reasons he had every reason to fear he was suspected, he kept on with his work. Actuated by a burning desire to do what he considered his duty, he took greater risks than he should have done—and from that moment his life was in very real danger. Staying, he was put under arrest. He managed to escape by what seemed a miracle, and started to cross to England. On the way over he was supposed to have vanished—presumably he was swept overboard during a gale—but after a couple of days word came to Sir Harker Bellamy that Jacob Lessing had actually been brought to London and was being held by a master-crook acting under the instructions of Lessing's

enemies in Ronstadt. On the surface this extraordinary statement might have appeared too amazing to be credited, but "The Mole" knew from long experience that Life often leaves fiction so far behind that the latter could be practically termed a non-starter. The incredible was what he looked for in his daily work—and he generally found it.

So much of Jacob Lessing's story Peter knew. What he did not know, and what he had to find out, was the information the agent had brought from Ronstadt. In the last message he had been successful in getting through from Pé, Lessing had intimated that he had news of such importance that he dared not trust it to the usual channels. Piecing events together, Bellamy had decided that, only a few minutes after he had coded this message, Lessing had been arrested.

Urged by the fear that the man would die before speaking again, Peter now put his hand on Lessing's head.

"You must tell me," he said. "Bellamy is relying on us—you, I mean."

The man put forth a fresh effort. But his strength was going fast; Peter was not able to understand a word he said; he might have been uttering gibberish.

Then, just as he was cursing Fate, Lessing made a sign with his right hand.

He wanted to write.

Thrusting a hand into his waistcoat pocket, Raeside pulled out a pencil. But he had no paper; there wasn't a scrap in any of his other

pockets. After being knocked out he had been searched, no doubt.

In an extremity a man's mind will often work at lightning speed; Raeside thought of his collar and tore it off. Lessing could use the inside fold.

A faint light showed in the dying man's eyes as he took both the pencil and collar from the other.

Some words came from his lips, and, although Peter could not understand (for Lessing had now crossed the borderline of delirium and was using a strange tongue) he caught their meaning; with infinite care he propped the man up and Lessing commenced to scrawl something on the inside fold of his collar. . . .

It was an incredible situation, but its bizarre nature did not appeal to Raeside, whose eyes were fixed on the door in an agony of doubt and suspense. Would Lessing be able to finish his message before interruption came? And what—— ? But there was no time to speculate further.

A deep sigh and Peter felt his burden grow heavy in his arms. The pencil slipped from the man's finger. Another sigh—so gentle, it might have been the merest ruffle of a bird's wing—and Peter knew himself to be in the presence of the dead.

A harrowing and unnerving thought, but the realisation of his duty remained; he picked up the collar and, without waiting to read what Lessing had written, unfolded it and placed it on his neck.

He had barely put his tie straight when the door burst open.

CHAPTER FOUR — THE GIRL OF MYSTERY

THE gigantic figure that flung itself into the room a second later might have been taken for some fabled monster. A second look told Raeside that it was Kuhn—a Kuhn driven to the point of madness by mingled rage and fear. It was easy enough to understand what had happened; his jailer, recovering consciousness and finding that the prisoner had escaped, had started rampaging about those underground rooms, and was now only a few yards away from him, intent on murder. The lust of killing was written plainly in his hideous face; it gleamed from his half-closed eyes. Peter knew that if he wanted to keep on living he must act quickly.

So it was that when the negro came rushing at him, his long, gorilla-like arms working convulsively, Raeside, watching his opportunity, side-stepped, and, driven desperate by an ever increasing sense of apprehension, let drive with all the power he had in a smashing upper-cut. This coloured mastodon, once he got him in his giant arms, would crush him to death. He had to hit the fellow out before they came to close quarters.

All the emotions he had felt in this house of the damned must have combined to give strength to the blow, for Kuhn, staggering back, rocked on his heels, before sliding heavily to the

ground. Unconscious that he had reduced his right hand to a state of unpleasant pulp, Raeside looked at his victim for a moment in a condition of complete bewilderment. Had he done that ? Was it his hand which had stretched this Goliath low ?

When he found that the negro did not move, a sense of wild rejoicing swept through him. Somewhere or other in that building was the door leading to freedom—and he was going to find it. He had been successful in his quest ; although that poor devil Lessing was dead, he had passed on his message to him. Bellamy would be delighted ; he might even say the few words of praise which he reserved for special occasions : " Thanks—good work."

Intoxicated by his success, Peter, stepping over the prostrate body of his foe, was half-way to the door when——

" I think it would be better if you put your hands above your head, young man."

" The Priest ! " Yes, there the devil was, smiling that satanic smile of his—and holding in a very steady hand a blunt-nosed automatic.

" You appear to have been somewhat busy since I left you, Mr. Raeside."

Realising that he was trapped again, Peter choked back a sob of dismay that had risen in his throat and crouched like a dog about to spring.

" Nothing foolish, young man—for I shall certainly kill you if you do."

The words of his enemy brought him a sense of proportion. A dead man would be of no possible use to Q.1—if he wanted to serve his

Department he had to go on living. Although it represented the hardest struggle of his life, he allowed the two men to whom " The Priest " had gestured to approach him and place handcuffs around his wrists.

" Bring him along."

It was whilst the small company walked through the passage that ran as a dividing line between those two sets of underground rooms that Peter caught sight of the strangest figure he had yet encountered in this living nightmare. From one of the rooms a girl looked out—a girl dressed with a quiet refinement that seemed strangely out of place in this vestibule of hell. But it was not her clothes nor yet her figure—slim and graceful—that held Peter Raeside's eye ; it was her face. If he was any judge, this girl had as much right in that underground Hades as a saint in a bawdy house, and yet, as the guards passed, she joked with them and turned on him—their prisoner—a look of complete indifference. . . .

What could such a girl be doing in this place ? What part did she play in this drama of evil ? Above all, who was she ?

These speculations kept his mind busy until he recalled that the underworld of London as he had seen it at close quarters during the past month contained many strange and totally unexpected figures ; in the basement night clubs, for instance, he had watched girls almost as refined-looking as this one, and when he had inquired about their history he had been told that once they had belonged to West End society but had come

a mucker in some way or other—generally over a man.

That was probably what had happened with this girl.

"Come along!" The man on his right forced his knee into the small of Raeside's back and sent him hurtling forward. Falling on his knees, he was helped to his feet by—"The Priest."

The latter was in his most bitingly sardonic mood.

"I thought I would go first to see that the guest-chamber was well aired," he stated with a smile. "If you look round, Mr. Raeside, you will notice that you have been allotted your old room. I trust you will find it as comfortable as before."

Peter shivered. He knew that this last state of his was going to be decidedly worse than his first—in other words, he had jumped from the frying-pan into the heart of the flames. But, all the same, he realised that he must continue to bluff the situation out—after all, "The Priest" had no real evidence against him; he was merely going on surmise.

During his absence a chair had been brought into the cellar and into this his enemy sank with a sigh of relief.

"It's tiring weather," he stated, "and I've had such a lot to do to-night. Up till now, Mr. Raeside, I've been very patient with you—too patient, apparently—but now circumstances are forcing my hand. In the first place, will you please explain how you managed to get out of this room?"

" Before I start replying to your questions," replied his prisoner, " I'm going to ask you one : what do you mean by treating me like this ? I accepted your word as a gentleman that you meant to do me a good turn—and this is the result : I'm knocked about, nearly killed and——"

" You can spare me your further histrionic efforts," the listener cut in. " I am quite satisfied about your identity—as satisfied," went on " The Priest," rising, " as I am that you heard what the man Lessing said immediately prior to his death. What that was I should like to know—and I mean to know."

" This rot has got to stop ! " was the retort. " What have I to do with any man Lessing ? "

" The Priest " gave another of his sarcastic smiles.

" You should keep a cooler head, Raeside ; you appear to forget that earlier in the evening during a fit of temper you admitted that you had been tracking me for the past month. But that by the way ; please answer my question : how did you manage to get out of this room ? "

Anything to play for time.

" That's simple enough. Whilst that nigger was talking his head off trying to put the wind up me, an unpleasant gentleman he called ' Mr. Jack ' appeared, brandishing a revolver. Mr. Jack was either drunk or drugged—I couldn't tell you which—but he evidenced a very nasty disposition to finish me off in your absence. As that did not meet with your negro friend's approval, Mr. Jack did his best to shoot daylight through him, but only

succeeded in grazing the top of his head, stunning him in the process. Mr. Jack then came for me, but I had as little desire as your negro friend to hand in my checks, and so I did my best to 'out' him. I succeeded (you would have done the same, no doubt) and, hearing someone groan, I rushed across the passage——"

"Now we come to the interesting part," broke in his listener.

Raeside shook his head.

"I'm afraid it was more revolting than interesting," he replied. "When I got into the room—if I can call it a room—I saw a man who had been tortured in such a ghastly fashion that he was dying. He did die, as a matter of fact, shortly after I entered."

"You're merely wasting time," shot back "The Priest." "I am waiting to hear what he said to you."

"He said nothing—he was not in a condition to speak."

"Yet you recognised him as Lessing?"

"I didn't know him from Adam—the man was a perfect stranger to me; I had never seen him before in my life. Don't you think this farce has gone on long enough? How much more do you expect me to stand?"

"That remains to be discovered," was the quiet response. "You saw fit to butt into my affairs, Raeside, and you must take the consequences."

The speaker made a sign, and the two men who had been guarding the door moved forward.

"Strip him!" ordered "The Priest."

Before Peter could prepare himself the two

had flung themselves on him. He wished now he had kept the revolver which had fallen out of the man Jack's hand during their struggle. But, at the time, he had decided it would be useless; "breaking" it, he had found the magazine empty; the would-be assassin had used up all the shots.

Caught more or less unawares, the contest was unequal from the beginning, and within a few minutes, his clothes torn into rags, he stood practically naked before his enemy. He was too angry even to fume; it was in a cold, level voice that he said:

"If I live to be a hundred I'll get my own back for this."

"The Priest" smiled at the threat.

"I am willing to bet any reasonable amount that you won't live to be a hundred, Raeside" —and, at the gibe, the two warders, each of whom had a relentless grip on one arm, grinned fawningly.

Raeside boiled.

"Now go through his clothes," ordered "The Priest."

It was no good resisting. With his captor threatening him with a revolver, he was powerless. He had to put the best face possible on it, literally as well as figuratively, for he knew he was being scrutinised intently by "The Priest," who was watching his features for a clue. So, although inwardly seething, he endeavoured to appear indifferent.

The two searchers did their job thoroughly.

"Sorry, Boss, there's nothing," said the spokesman.

For the first time since he had met him Peter saw "The Priest" lose his masterly self-control.

"Damn and blast you for a couple of fools!" he cried back. "He's got to have something on him—or," speaking more slowly, "if he hasn't got it in his clothes he's got it in his head. All right; tell Kuhn to come here."

As one of the men went to obey the summons "The Priest" gave orders to his comrade.

"Give him back his shoes, socks and trousers—that's all."

"All right, Boss."

"And now listen, you," the chief crook went on, his face grim-set and his voice venomous: "I've wasted enough time; I don't intend to waste any more. Kuhn will be here in a minute—and he won't be in a pleasant mood. You saw what he did to Lessing—well, that will be nothing compared with what he'll do to you once I give him the word. Your only chance—and believe me, I'm serious—is to come through, and come through clean. What did Lessing tell you?"

The restraint which Raeside had been putting on himself burst all bonds.

"I told you before," he cried. "When I got to the man I found him practically dead. He never said a word to me."

"All right." The gesture "The Priest" made was significant. "And now," turning, "here's Kuhn."

The monstrous negro was not a pretty sight. In addition to the wound on the top of his head, which had left a blood-red sear behind, a part of

his upper lip was swollen to twice its normal size as the result of Peter's smashing, knock-out blow. The bloodshot eyes ran over the prisoner's torso with an avidity that sent a chilling sensation of fear down Peter's spine.

"How are you feeling now, Kuhn?" inquired "The Priest."

The negro shook his head.

"Not so good, Boss—not so good."

"Oh, you'll be all right once you get the whip in your hand. Mr. Raeside here has been disputing with me your skill with the whip, Kuhn—he seems to think that you're a novice. I want you to show him."

A quiver that started at Kuhn's feet and rippled its way right up to his rolling eyes made all but one of the watchers laugh—but it was a laugh whose merriment came from the Pit itself.

Kuhn shuffled forward to his employer.

"You want me to give him de whole works, Boss?" he asked.

"The Priest" nodded.

"The whole works, Kuhn—and then some."

"I'se dying to show him how I can use de whip, Boss." Suiting action to his words, the speaker commenced to strip. Quickly he was as naked as the prisoner himself. Then Raeside felt in danger of fainting; for one of the men who had been sent out of the room returned. In his hand was a gigantic cat-o'-nine-tails.

CHAPTER FIVE — LEGERDEMAIN

It was a fiendish weapon of torture—this short-handled whip, every separate lash of which was weighted, Raeside could see, by a piece of steel. It would cut through flesh like a knife cutting butter. Even in conjecture the prospect of being flogged with such an instrument was prostrating.

"Before you're tied up," he heard a voice say, and realised that "The Priest" was addressing him again, "I want to ease your mind of any doubt about me not living up to my word. Kuhn has my full permission to do what he likes with you. If the whip isn't enough he has other means . . ."

A horrible vision flashed through the listener's mind; he recalled the mangled body of the dead Lessing; what had been done to Lessing would be done to him, and worse. That had been promised.

"For the last time, will you tell me what Lessing said to you?" demanded "The Priest."

Peter clenched his hands.

"He told me nothing."

"Tie him up," came the shouted order.

Hands seized him and he was dragged to the wall farthest from the door. Here, fixed to the masonry, were stout hooks with attached chains. His guards had no scruples; a blow on the head

stopped him from further struggling, and, almost before he was fully aware of the fact, he stood a helpless prisoner—a prospective victim of a monster's sadistic hate.

Every nerve in his body protested as the sound of the many-lashed whip hurtled through the air. It was Kuhn, the torturer, testing his weapon. The next time . . .

But, as he waited, a prey to the most unnerving fear that any living man could harbour, another startling sound filled the room.

"*The splits! Look out—the splits are here!*"

The splits! That was crooks' *argot* for the police.

Amid the confused clamour that ensued, Raeside heard "The Priest" giving certain instructions. What they were his numbed brain could not register; in fact, relief had come more in the guise of an enemy than of a friend, for his tortured nerves could stand no more; he felt himself slipping down into an abyss that never reached bottom.

When he established connection with reality again, he found himself standing in front of a stranger. The latter was a shortly-built man with a squat, yellow face, in which a pair of pig-like eyes glowered.

"Where's Lessing?" this man demanded.

He had exchanged one nightmare for another, it seemed; into whose hands had he fallen? Then he remembered.

"Thank God you came when you did!" he remarked fervently.

There was a coarse laugh from somewhere behind him, but the squat-faced man gave no sign of merriment himself.

" Where's Lessing ? " he repeated, and now Raeside was able to detect a strong foreign accent. " Come on, find your tongue—where's Lessing ? "

Whilst his brain rioted afresh, Peter felt it would be wise to keep to the truth.

" He's dead," he said.

A cry from those standing at the back, and a grunt from the leader, greeted the announcement.

" How do you know he's dead ? "

" Because I saw him. ' The Priest ' had him tortured. It was the nigger, Kuhn, who did it."

Another cry. During the short silence that followed, Raeside tried to solve this fresh puzzle. It was the police who had raided the House of the Damned ; that had been proved by the warning given by the shouting voice. Then, if these men were the police, why were they treating him in such a fashion ? The squat-faced man showed no more mercy in his countenance than " The Priest " himself might have done. He decided he must put up a stand for himself. He had to see Bellamy . . . At the thought his hand went instinctively to his neck. The collar ! Where was the collar ? The last he had seen of it was when the two guards had thrown his clothes into a corner of the cellar.

" What are you fussing about ? " asked the squat-faced man. It was the voice of an enemy. This man was not a policeman—he should have

realised that from the first. He and his men must have got into the house in Greek Street by a ruse.

"I want my clothes," said Raeside.

"Oh, you want your clothes, do you? What do you want them for?"

"I want to leave here——"

A roar of laughter stopped him from saying anything more.

"You shall go presently," retorted the leader, "but in the meantime there are one or two more questions I'd like to put to you. Who are you, in the first place?"

"My name's Raeside."

"Raeside, eh? Well, what were you doing in that house?"

"The man they call 'The Priest' got me there by a trick."

The other stepped forward and seized his arm.

"But you went willingly enough. If you hadn't gone willingly you wouldn't have known who Lessing was—now, would you?"

Raeside realised he had made a mistake.

"Where did they take Lessing?" now demanded the other.

"I don't know. He was in a cellar opposite to the one where you found me. The last I saw of him was——" Caution told him to stop. "I'll start from the beginning," he said, "and then you'll know all I know—whoever you are."

There was silence whilst he told his story as briefly and succinctly as possible. He told everything except the incident about the collar; that was the secret of Q.1, Sir Harker Bellamy's

secret, and, whatever fresh indignity Fate had in store for him, it would remain Bellamy's.

"So you're a British Secret Service man!" was the squat-faced leader's retort when the tale had come to an end.

"Yes—who are you?"

The man drew himself up to his full height of five feet seven.

"I am Radok," he said.

Radok! Raeside was sufficiently familiar with the political situation in Ronstadt to recognise the name—which belonged to the leader of the Revolutionary party. The knowledge gave him confidence of a sort.

"What do you want with Lessing?" he asked.

"That's my concern," was the answer.

Peter bit his lip. There seemed no sense in this grotesque situation. If this man was really Radok, then, being the implacable enemy of Kuhureich, Dictator of Ronstadt, he should have been a friend of Jacob Lessing—or, if not a friend, he should have remained neutral. There was some fresh devilry here.

"I have told you all I know," he said wearily. "And now, if you please, I want rest. I have nearly lost my life three times to-night; I can't stand any more."

The man who called himself Radok negatived the proposal with a shake of the head.

"You know too much—and yet you don't know enough," he replied enigmatically.

CHAPTER SIX "THE PRIEST" GIVES ORDERS

"THE PRIEST," taking the cigar from his mouth, spat a blasphemous oath.

"That's the second time to-night you've let me down," he said, raking the pallid-faced Poland Jack with every word.

The accused pawed the air with twitching hands.

"It was Benny the Rat who said it was the splits. I saw him on the stairs and he gave me the wire. I didn't wait to see who they really were—I just came on down and told you, Boss."

The listener licked the cigar with feverish lips. He felt humiliated and ashamed. This was the worst defeat he had encountered for many years. He had been tricked so neatly that the whole of the underworld must be laughing at him by this time. The raiding party had not been the police at all; they had belonged to "Squatface" Foxwell, his rival for supremacy in the Soho hinterland. Squatface must have paid Benny the Rat to give that alarming cry of "Splits!" All right; he would settle with Benny later on . . .

But for the fact that he had the dead body of Lessing on the premises, he would have stood firm at that first cry, and, when the police entered, would have given them a courteous

welcome. For, so long as they had nothing definitely pinned on him, he—nor any other crook, come to that—had no reason to fear the splits. But, with that dead body hanging around, he could not afford to take any chances. The " dicks " were always so damnably curious when they came across dead bodies . . .

That was why, after shouting to the others, he had pressed the secret spring in the cellar wall and had led the way into the hideaway of which no one not in his confidence had any idea.

And he had taken all this trouble for nothing ! Five minutes after the departure of the raiders, word had arrived from an outside source, a trusted " runner," that it was " Squatface " Foxwell who had come a-visiting that night.

Why ? That was the question which worried him. Although they were rivals and enemies, Squatface would not have taken such a risk if the promised reward had not been correspondingly great.

Was it Lessing whom Foxwell had been after ? But of what value would Lessing, alive or dead, be to *him* ? How had Squatface got to know about Lessing, in any case ? It was all very puzzling.

Back in the house again, " The Priest " had gone straight to the cellar which had served as Lessing's death-chamber. Yes, the body was still there, stowed away in the worm-eaten oaken chest which, with other refuse, had been allowed to rot in that room of mildew and decay.

The discovery had increased his bewilderment. But perhaps Squatface—that was assuming he had been after Lessing—had mistaken

Raeside for the other and had gone off gloating with the wrong prisoner! This seemed the most likely solution to the puzzle. But he had to know the truth; he had to know many things which were quite dark to him at the present time. He had to know who was at the back of Squatface and why this man, or organisation, had employed Foxwell to kidnap the real or supposed Lessing. Convinced in his own mind that Lessing had passed on his secret to Raeside during the few moments the British Secret Service man had spent with him before his death, it was galling to realise that this knowledge might now be in his enemy's hands. Squatface would have about as much mercy as himself—and Raeside must have reached by this time the very limit of his endurance.

The three men with "The Priest" waited for a decision. As bad luck would have it, his gang were numerically weak that night; no fewer than four of the men who served him as chieftains were away in the provinces, doing important jobs; and, with Foxwell alive to every chance, he felt himself momentarily impotent.

Foxwell's head-quarters were situated in that new district of Soho lying to the north of Warren Street. As a matter of fact, he did not know the exact address, although, of course, that could be learned. But all this would take time—and he wanted immediate results. The three men now waiting for him to speak watched every movement of his face. He knew that any decision he might make would be momentous. His hold over these crooks depended to a great extent upon success or failure that night.

He resolved to put his cards on the table.

"Well, boys, Squatface has got the laugh of us—there's no doubt about that. Still, if you ask me, I think he's taken a hell of a chance for nothing. I'd like to go after him—there's nothing I'd like better—but, with the rest of the boys away, we simply daren't take the chance; it would be four against a dozen—and Squatface would be waiting for us. What do you say?"

Apparently, the words were an agreeable echo of what each listener was himself thinking.

"You've got it right, Boss," said one, and the two others nodded.

"And we can't pull that police trick off on Squatface."

This time three nods confirmed the wisdom of the words.

"None of you boys would like to do a little scouting, I suppose?"

The tallest of the three listeners, a man who had a cigarette glued to his lower lip, put forward a counter-proposal.

"It's simple enough, Boss—if you'll only do it. Put a call through to the Yard; let the 'dicks' be shot at."

"The Priest" stared at the speaker as though he were looking at something unclean.

"We can't bring the 'dicks' into this, Larry, and you ought to know it," he replied sternly. "Besides, it's a private concern. . . . All right, we won't worry any more about it to-night. You boys can clear off. As I said just now, I think Squatface has taken a hell of a chance

for nothing. He seems to me to have got hold of the wrong idea."

He had meant to be reassuring, and, judging by the relieved expressions on the others' faces as they filed away, the scheme had been successful. But, now that he was alone, he drank deeply once again of the waters of bitterness. "The Priest" had risen to his present position in crookdom by bold and unscrupulous methods, but to-night he had been outwitted and made to look a fool. The knowledge seared him like an open wound.

For ten minutes he remained hunched in his chair, lost in thought. Then he came to a decision.

The girl! Why hadn't he thought of her before? She could do the scouting—who better?

"Lily the Doll" stood facing her employer.

"You've been with me now nearly three months," said "The Priest," "and I've never asked you to do anything really important—anything that might be likely to scare you—have I?"

"No," was the reply in a low tone.

"Well, I'm going to give you your first big job to-night—now," the crook went on. "Here," handing her a piece of paper, "is an address; I want you to use your wits and get into that place. And once you're in, I want you to keep your eyes open and your ears well back. Squat-face Foxwell—you've heard of him, of course?"

A nod.

"Yes, new as you are to the game, you must

have heard of Squatface. Well, Foxwell and me are enemies, see? And to-night he pulls a trick that's left me with my nose in the dirt."

"What kind of trick?"

"The Priest" leaned back in his chair. The speaker was a new one on him; he had read stories in books about girls of refinement, culture and breeding descending to the Underworld through one cause or another, but until Poland Jack had brought this moll along and had vouched for her, he had always given such yarns the merry ha! ha!

"I wish I understood you," he now confessed.

The girl known in that house as "Lily the Doll" (a crude tribute to her beauty she had supposed it to be) smiled enigmatically.

"I don't even understand myself," she replied. "Suppose we cut out the small-talk and get down to essentials?"

The man lowered his face so that she should not see the admiration in his eyes. In the ordinary way women did not appeal to him (his tastes did not run very much in that line), but this girl grew on one. . . . Which was one more reason why, at the earliest possible chance, he would have to get rid of Poland Jack.

"All right," he concurred. "This is the lay-out, then: there was a fellow here to-night called Raeside; he was valuable to me—which was the reason I brought him along—and, although he proved obstinate, I was pretty certain of getting what I wanted out of him, when Squatface arrived with his gang."

"Why did you let Squatface get away with it?"

He stared at her again. Yes, this was a girl of

spirit, of nerve, of confidence in herself. He did not care overmuch for being stood up to in the ordinary way, but this was different — very different.

"Do I look the type who would allow something valuable to be stolen under my very nose?" he asked by way of reply.

"No," she said; "you don't."

"Thanks," was the curt comment. "You're right at that. But Squatface pulled a trick—a lowdown trick, too—as I told you before. He got Benny the Rat to shout 'Splits'—and, because there was a dead body on my hands in one of the cellars, I thought it best not to be very much in evidence. So I called the boys and we all beat it."

"Leaving the man Raeside to be picked up by your enemy?"

"I had to. He was chained. Kuhn—but I needn't go into that. Now you know enough," he continued quickly. "There's the address of Squatface's hideaway," pointing to the paper she held in her hand. "I want you to get in there somehow, find out exactly what's happening and keep me posted. Afraid?"

"No, I'm not afraid." Which, for the greater part, was true: she had been through sufficient during the past three months to inure her to anything. "I'll go," she concluded.

"That's fine," he said, and, rising, patted her on the shoulder.

"I don't fancy women much as a rule," he said, "but. . . ."

"You can keep the nuts," was the reply he received.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DEATH SENTENCE

" *You've got the wrong man !* "

The speaker stood at the end of the long table facing Squatface Foxwell and openly sneered.

" What do you think I am—a sucker ? " he cried angrily. " I offered you a couple of hundred for Jacob Lessing—but the fellow upstairs is no more like Lessing than I am like the Pope—not so much ! The deal's off."

The kidnapper tried to save his squat face.

" We could only bring what was there," he replied. " We found this fellow tied up in a cellar, all ready to be lashed, and we naturally thought he must be Lessing."

The London representative of that curious but highly efficient worldwide organisation which existed for the sale—the very profitable sale—of international secrets to any country who was willing to pay the price, sneered the second time—only now he put more volume into it.

" What's the good of *you* thinking, Foxwell ? " he enquired. " It only hurts your head."

There was an angry murmur from the men sitting on either side of the long table, but their leader, determined to be diplomatic because he did not want a very valuable business connection severed, hushed the critics into silence.

" It's all right, Danny," he said. " If I make a mistake I'm willing to admit it. As you say, the deal's off. If the fellow upstairs isn't Lessing, that's all there is to it." He did not add, for further diplomatic reasons, that, according to the information he had received from the present prisoner, the man Danny Mayhew had so set his heart upon securing was no longer of any use to anyone—because, in other words, he was dead. Squatface, be it noted, had hoped against hope that the captive his men had brought away from " The Priest's " headquarters in Greek Street had been bluffing to try to save his skin.

" If you don't want him," motioning to the ceiling, " what am I to do with him ? "

Mayhew evidenced possession of a grim humour.

" What do you do with your other garbage ? " he retorted, and, turning on his heel, left the council chamber.

Discussion, after he had gone, became animated. A feeling of unrest, not to say actual fear, was evident. The sinister shadow of " The Priest," absent until now, fell across the room. It was one thing to raid the enemy's headquarters when a couple of hundred pounds were to be picked up at the end ; but it was quite another pair of shoes to know that the risk and trouble entailed had brought nothing but words of contempt from the prospective purchaser.

If Squatface, like his distinguished rival in Greek Street, had not been a born leader, his authority might have been overthrown during

the next few minutes. As it was, the dissatisfaction of those gathered at the meeting concentrated itself on the prisoner upstairs. He had to be got rid of—for, so long as he remained on the premises, he was a positive menace to their safety. But how? There were many ways, of course, including the favourite one of the knife. But when the proposal was tabled, it met with general disapproval. Murder had temporarily gone out of fashion: at any rate, no one present expressed any desire to become the killer.

It was Long Joe Binks, whose speciality was driving the fast cars used in smash-and-grab raids, who pointed a way out of the difficulty.

"There'll be trouble over this, Squat," he said to the leader, "and you know the best thing to do when there's trouble."

"Go into the country," proffered a second voice.

Long Joe's usually lugubrious face split into a smile.

"That's right," he said. "We all go into the country. That means leaving here. Well, then," he continued, warming to his subject, "when we come back we find another place—eh, Squat?"

Foxwell gave no sign yet of comprehending.

"Go on," he encouraged, and it may have been merely a coincidence that he tilted his heavy features upwards.

"I'm coming to him," went on Long Joe. "He's found gassed."

"Gassed?"

"It's as easy as kiss your hand. There's a

stove on the landing outside, isn't there ? Well, we just get a long piece of tubing—and there," triumphantly, " you are ! "

" One minute, Joe." It was Squatface speaking now. " When he's found by the police—as he will be sooner or later—they'll put two and two together and think that we've had something to do with it."

" Not at all," came back the originator of the scheme. " Nobody knows who this fellow is, do they ? "

" You blasted fool ! " cried a voice to the left. " He belongs to the British Secret Service—at least, he told Squat so."

" Oh, well," replied Long Joe lugubriously, " I didn't 'ear anything about that. And any way," with a return of confidence, " he might just have been trying to bluff. Well, it's either that or shoving him in the river."

" The river's the best," said a third man. " The splits can never tell how a bloke gets into the river. What say, Squat ? "

" Yes," replied the leader slowly, " the river's the best. Joe," turning to Banks, " get that dark saloon round here in ten minutes. Go on," as the long crook lingered, " do what I tell you. And listen : this job is going to be left to you."

" To me ? "

" To you. See that you don't bungle it. Come on, boys." Squatface rose and headed the procession, leaving the discomfited Banks to stare after him.

* * * * *

Peter Raeside groaned in agony of mind as well as of body. He had merely exchanged one

danger for another—and he could not be certain yet that his last state wasn't as bad as any that had gone before. He had been a fool to admit his identity : these new crooks would have about as much use for a British Secret Service agent in their midst as they would have had for a rattlesnake.

In one respect he was better off : instead of a cold cellar floor he was lying on a bed ; but this bed might have been fashioned by Procrustes himself, so much torture did it give him. And he was bound so tightly that movement of any kind was practically impossible.

How much longer he could hold out against such overwhelming odds he did not know, but he wished the end might come. He had suffered enough. Had any man ever been placed in such a series of damnable positions ? If only he could escape. . . .

What a mocking thought ! He would never get away alive. The only chance he had of leaving that attic was to be carried out feet first. . . .

And yet, if he could but once get free ! Practically over his head was a skylight, and through this he could see a handful of stars. Was his brain going, or were they twinkling him a message ?

It was shortly after this that he became certain he had developed delirium ; for, looking down at him through the dirty glass of that same skylight, was the face of a girl ! He recognised her immediately—this was the same girl he had passed when his guards marched him along that passage-way in the House of the

Damned—the girl who could have helped him, perhaps, but wouldn't—the girl who exchanged pleasantries with his warders but had given him nothing but a contemptuous and indifferent stare . . .

Yes, he must be delirious, for otherwise there was no plausible explanation for the girl putting her finger to her lips in a gesture of caution. With a series of creaks which sounded so ominous that his heart was brought into his mouth, the skylight was opened. A pair of exquisitely-shaped legs now showed themselves —and the next moment the girl herself had landed lightly on the bottom of the bed.

" Keep quiet," she said tensely.

With puzzled eyes Raeside watched her slim fingers untie the knots of his bonds. Within three minutes he was free.

" Who——? " he stared, but she silenced him a second time.

" I've come here to help you," she said.

He tried to reason the thing out, but failed. This girl was an emissary of " The Priest," and therefore could not be trusted. Why should he trust her ?

Yet, when she spoke again there was so much sincerity in her tone that he felt his purpose weakening.

" I need scarcely tell you, I suppose, Mr. Raeside, that you are in great danger ? The man who took you away from the house in Greek Street is a deadly enemy of ' The Priest,' and, at a meeting which has just concluded downstairs, it has been decided that——"

"Who are you?" Peter demanded. That at least, might give him some clue.

She shook her head—wearily, or so it seemed to him.

"That doesn't matter. What does matter is that I want to help you—don't you believe me?"

He took one long, intent look at her, but the glance which met his did not waver.

"I'll take a chance," he said. "Over in that corner are my clothes. I don't know if there's a collar there—"

"A collar?"

"A collar. If you're really sincere, take it to"—he looked round as though enemies were already closing in upon them—"take it to Sir Harker Bellamy, 405A, Primrose Gardens, Whitehall. Can you remember that?"

"Yes—but what about you?"

"It doesn't matter about me—what matters is getting that collar to Bellamy. Tell him"—again he looked round—"that Lessing wrote something in code on the inside fold. Can you remember that too?"

"Of course. But what you say is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Because I can't leave you here for those men——"

Raeside became impatient.

"I've already told you it doesn't matter about me—it's the message that's so important. But how am I to know," he went on bitterly, "that you won't take it straight back to 'The Priest'?"

"Do you think me so contemptible as that?"

" I don't know what to think. I saw you at that house——"

" I was there for a definite purpose."

" Won't you tell me something more ? "

" How terribly weak you are ! " she cried, as, finding the strain of standing up too much, he fell back utterly exhausted on the bed.

" That's why," he whispered, " I shouldn't have any chance if I tried to get away ; that's why I had to ask you to run this risk for me."

" Don't talk—just rest," she said. " I'll manage—somehow."

As he lay back, feeling utterly mortified, he kept his eyes on her face. She was beautiful, this girl—and at one time, and that not so long ago, must have had the shelter of a good home, the care and love of indulgent parents, the society of friends.

But what was the use of speculating further ? With himself out of the hunt, this girl crook was his only help, and if she played the traitress, as seemed likely in spite of all her reassurances, he was utterly defeated.

He tried to rise, for a thought had leapt into his mind.

" Give me your arm," he said.

So it was, with his hand on the girl's shoulder, that he staggered across the floor. He had not realised until now the distressing sight he must present in her eyes. Bare to the waist (his captors had merely thrown an overcoat over him before dragging him away from the house in Greek Street), with blood and grime making hideous his nakedness, he must have looked a sorry if not repulsive spectacle. Why had she

not shrunk away? Was she so used to unnerving sights?

But, before he could find any answer to this fresh conundrum, he had reached the corner of the attic into which his clothes had been so carelessly tossed.

At the top of the heap was something white . . .

The collar!

In his still distraught state he could have pressed it to his lips. His eyes shone as he picked it up.

"Take it," he urged; "get away with it while there's time. For God's sake listen to me—hundreds of people's lives may depend on Bellamy getting this to-night. In any case it's vitally important . . . No, I'm not mad," he continued, watching what he imagined to be dawning in her face; "I'm terribly sane. Although it's a wonder . . ."

Then he fell all of a heap, the collar still tightly gripped in his right hand.

She whom that part of the Underworld into which she had adventured knew as "Lily the Doll" drew back into the shadows as she heard a heavy foot making the boards of the passage outside creak. From the pocket of her tweed coat she drew a small revolver.

Peter watched fascinatedly. This girl, a perfect stranger, intended to risk her own life defending him—if he allowed her to do so.

"You can't," he sent across the few feet of space in a whisper.

She gave him for reply a decisive sign with her left hand. He interpreted it correctly as meaning "Keep quiet—and don't be a fool!"

The door opened slowly. A man's face appeared. It was an unpleasant face, long, lugubrious and yet stamped with viciousness. It peered, and then an expression of almost comical alarm leapt into the dull features.

"Where——?"

"Here!" came the crisp retort. "Put those hands up!"

Although it was a girl's voice that had uttered the order, instinct made him obey the summons unquestioningly. The long arms went ceilingwards.

"That's better—keep them there, won't you?"

"My God! A girl!" came the ejaculation.

"Correct the first time! Now get over into that corner!" Under the persuasive influence of the revolver, the crook sidled across the floor.

Then, suddenly, his gaunt frame seemed to straighten out. Like an animal he sprang.

"Look out!" cried Raeside, but before the sound of the words had died on his lips he saw the girl go down.

Of what happened during the next couple of minutes he had no clear recollection; all he knew was falling astride the man and smashing blows into his face with both fists. Quite quickly the other went limp.

Rolling the body on one side, Peter looked at the girl. He expected to find her senseless, but although obviously shaken, she rose to her feet with a laugh.

"Thanks," she said shortly; "But how did you manage it. You were half dead one moment, and the next you were like a tiger . . .

That revolver wasn't loaded, but I didn't imagine he would think I was bluffing . . . Oh, that hand ! "

Swaying on his feet—for now reaction had come once again—Peter put the battered member behind his back. The temporary madness which had given him that astonishing strength had left behind it a revolting nausea. Death would have been very pleasant that moment.

It was the girl who brought him to his senses.

" Listen," she said ; " we are in a hole, but we must keep control of our nerves ; otherwise——" She did not finish the sentence, but the shrug of her shapely shoulders was sufficiently eloquent. " I believe this brute," motioning to the groaning crook, " is alone in the house ; he was to kill you and then fling your body into the Thames—at least, that appeared, from what I was able to overhear, to be the original idea."

" You're marvellous ! " murmured Raeside. The consciousness of what he owed this girl swept through him in a flood.

She shook her head.

" That's nonsensical, of course, and, in any case, this is scarcely the time to exchange compliments. What we have to consider is which is the best way to get out of this place. As I was telling you just now, I believe the house to be empty—but, on the other hand, you can never tell with criminals ; they have such crooked minds. The chief of this gang—a gentleman with the pleasant nickname of ' Squatface '—certainly ordered your death."

" How do you know ? "

" Because, my dear man, I overheard him. As I was saying, he certainly ordered your death and instructed this creature to carry it out. But whether he thought better of the original plan—whether, in other words, he is still waiting downstairs with the rest of the gang instead of clearing off into the country as I heard him declare, is a question which remains to be answered." She broke off to ask quickly : " How are you feeling now ? "

Raeside put a hand to his tousled head.

" Curiously enough, I'm feeling better," he said. He was on the point of adding that this reinvigoration was due entirely to her, but, realising how fatuous and banal such a remark would sound, wisely refrained.

" Then that decides it—we must go overland," said the girl. Getting on the bed, she sprang upwards like a professional gymnast, and, gripping the edge of the skylight, drew her body up. Within a minute she was lying flat on the roof and looking down at him.

" Give me your hands," she said.

Raeside, now on the bed, stared into her eyes.

" Where's the collar ? " he asked.

She gave a short, bitter laugh.

" You still don't trust me ? "

He replied :

" I don't think you will let me down."

With that they both heard the sound of scrambling footsteps in the passage outside.

CHAPTER EIGHT — THE ADVENTURESS

"LILY THE DOLL," crouching low, heard that sound with a sense of increasing perturbation. It was different from the one which had preceded it ten minutes or so before. That had meant one intruder; now, several persons must be on the threshold of the attic.

Afraid to speak, she made signs to him to give her his hands. She did not know if she had sufficient strength in her wrists, but the attempt had to be made.

Then, to her dismay, she saw that the man did not intend to try to escape.

"Go."

The word rang in her ears like a clarion call; it sounded so loud that she felt certain the men outside must have heard.

She shook her head.

"For God's sake—go!"

There was so much anguished entreaty in his voice that she could hesitate no longer. After all, he knew best—if what he had said was true; if, as he had stated, hundreds of lives might depend upon her getting that collar away (how ridiculous it would have seemed if only the circumstances were different!), then her duty was plain, even if he were killed. She had no alternative; she must obey his command.

Closing the skylight as quietly as possible, she commenced to wriggle her way over the slated roof towards the rainpipe up which she had climbed twenty minutes before. It was fortunate that she had continued the gymnastic exercises at which she had been such an adept at school. The two desires, to keep her body slim and supple and to retain a perfect physical fitness, had paid ample interest that night.

Behind, as she continued to wriggle her way over the roof, came a confused murmur of voices. The temptation was to stop, and, indeed, she would have done so, but for the memory of the man's face as he had sent her that second frantic entreaty.

During the past three months she had encountered many strange adventures—but never one so strange as this. Who was this man, and why had he come that night to the house in Greek Street? He must be some desperate adventurer—a person almost as reckless as herself. The thought of him remaining in that attic to be murdered momentarily paralysed her nerves—but a few seconds later, remembering her duty, recalling the solemn pledge she had made, she went on.

Looking down from the roof-top, she noticed with a sense of relief that the street below was practically deserted. Making sure that the collar was safe—she had pushed it down the front of her dress—she prepared to descend. It was a risky manœuvre, and, if once her courage had failed her, she might have landed with a broken neck on the pavement below.

But, after what seemed an age, she felt her feet touching solid ground.

And, in that same instant, she heard a harsh, peremptory voice :

" What d'you think you're doing ? "

Looking up, she stared into the red, stolid face of a police constable. She realised at once that the policeman was suspicious—as, of course, he might well be—and that he possessed about as much imagination as a camel's hump. If she told him that she must be on her way because hundreds of people's lives were at stake, he would have thought her a lunatic. On the other hand——

" Officer," she said earnestly, " I've just left a man in an attic of that house who may be murdered any minute. Can you get help and force your way in ? "

" Ho, yes ! "

It was plain he did not believe her ; it was equally apparent that he considered her story an attempt to blind him to the truth.

" Better come along with me," he stated menacingly.

A convulsion of fear passed through her. Time was the most precious thing at the moment —even more precious than the safety of the man she had left in the attic. In order to live up to her promise she had to be free—the thought of being taken to a police station, questioned, detained, and possibly brought up at a police court the following morning, was prostrating.

She acted on an impulse.

" Help ! " she called.

Three men, slouching past, stopped.

" Keep that trap of yours shut," warned the policeman.

" Help ! " she called again.

With that the constable smacked her on the side of her face, but she did not feel any pain ; her interest was taken up by the sight of the three men crossing the roadway. They looked criminals—no doubt were, for this was a criminal quarter—but if they could get her free from that policeman's grip . . .

" Wot's 'e doing to you, miss ? " asked the foremost.

Before she could reply the constable had turned on the inquirer.

" Keep out of this—d'you 'ear me ? Keep out of this."

" Keep out of what ? " The tone of the second man was insolent. " What the 'ell do you mean, anyway, by treatin' a young lydy like this ? "

He must have given a sign to his two companions, for, with a simultaneous bound, the three were on the constable. The latter tried in vain to blow his whistle. That metal messenger was snatched from his hand and ground beneath the heel of one of his assailants.

" 'Op it, lydy."

" Lily the Doll " did not wait for any second urging. She felt self-contempt for the trick she had played on the policeman, but she was desperate.

It was not a time for standing on any scruple : she had to get away. With that resolve, she started to run down the street. Furtive eyes

watched her from doorways ; twice a hand was outthrust from the black maw of an alley—but on each occasion she swerved aside, fear making her heart beat like a drum.

It was not until she reached the crowded Oxford Street that she felt safe. Then she hailed the first prowling taxi.

" Where to, lydy ? "

She had forgotten the address !

" Oh, Whitehall."

" Just Whitehall, lydy ? "

" Yes—be quick, please."

" All right, lydy." The driver, imperturbable, like all his kind, shut the door with a bang, climbed back into his seat and threw in his clutch.

She was distraught. Supposing she could not recall the address ? Had the man given it to her ? Yes, she was certain of that—just as sure as she was that he had mentioned the word " Whitehall." But Whitehall, especially at that time of night, might prove as big an area as the Sahara Desert. What a fool she was ! Why had she forgotten ?

It was this fresh extremity of fear, no doubt, that caused her to look through the window at the back of the cab. What she saw made her lean forward and speak excitedly through the tube.

" Driver ! "

" Yes, lydy ? "

" Driver, I believe there's someone following us—I want you to try to throw them off. It's important."

" Leave it to me, lydy."

Speaking as though he were an old-time knight, resentful at his liege lady being forced to suffer an insult, he made a quick swerve to the left and plunged into a maze of streets that seemed to the girl to be a labyrinth so complicated that there could be no outlet.

There followed a riotous harlequinade, in which her driver appeared to her excited fancy to play all the parts at once ; but when the taxi emerged into the glaring night life of Piccadilly Circus this eccentric behaviour on the part of her charioteer and his engine had apparently proved successful ; at any rate, there was no sign now of any following car.

And then, as though to add further joy to her happiness, her brain picked up from the ether the information she wanted : she remembered the address !

It was late. Would Sir Harker Bellamy be at his office ? If not, what could she do ?

" Don't go—I may want you again," she said to the driver.

" Very good, lydy."

Turning from speaking to the man, she noticed a slouch-hatted figure standing with his back to the wall a little distance away. As she stepped forward, this man emerged from his hiding-place.

" Hullo, kid," he said in a hissing tone.

Who he was she did not know. An associate of Poland Jack's, perhaps, whom she had not yet met. In any case, an enemy.

" Out of my way," she retorted, but the man paid no heed.

" Jes' one little kiss, kid," insinuated the loafer.

She did not know what to do. This casual amorist was likely to prove a nuisance. In this emergency, unexpected help came.

" Is this bloke annoying you, lydy ? " It was the taxi-driver, looking, for all his unshaven face and bloated features, a veritable fairy godfather.

" Yes," she said.

" Then 'op it, you—and be quick, too."

The man, sneering, flashed a hand to his pocket, but before he could draw whatever weapon might have been concealed there, the taxi-driver, showing an unexpected resource, had stepped forward and had brought his fist into violent contact with the other's narrow jaw. Down the man went as though he had been struck by a hammer.

" I'm a bit out o' training now, lydy," vouchsafed her saviour, " but there was a time when I won three cups at boxing. Ah ! " sucking in his breath. " Them were the days . . . Well, you go on about your business, lydy, and I'll see that there ain't no more trouble. I'll be waitin' here." Taking the stub of a cigarette from behind his ear, the Good Samaritan struck a match and inhaled as though life was very good to him at that moment—as, indeed, it was.

" Thank you a thousand times."

" That's all right, lydy."

Mounting the steps that led to the front door,

" Lily the Doll " rang the bell. It was some time before she received any answer to her summons ; then the door opened cautiously and a face looked out.

" Whom do you wish to see, please ? "

She lowered her voice.

" Sir Harker Bellamy. It's a matter of life and death."

" Will you please come in ? "

It was a discreetly lit hall, but she was able to see that the man was of the official type. He was dressed in dark clothes, had a mask for a face, and looked at her with a cold scrutiny that might have been unnerving in any other circumstances.

" Are you Sir Harker Bellamy ? " she inquired.

" No."

" Where is Sir Harker ? "

" He is not in at present."

" Then who are you ? "

" I'm his secretary."

The speaker led the way into a room at the back of the house. He closed the door and pointed to a seat by the side of a gas fire.

" You must excuse me asking," he said, " but why do you wish to see Sir Harker Bellamy ? "

" Because I have something to give him—something important."

" I've already told you I'm his secretary."

She hesitated. She had been through so much that she did not know whether to trust this man or not. But time pressed.

" Listen," she said, and thereupon plunged into her story.

When she had finished, a minute later, the man held out his hand.

"Thank you," he said. "I will give the collar to Sir Harker directly he arrives."

Still she hesitated.

"Do you wonder that I doubt you after what has happened?"

"You need not doubt me. The man who gave you the collar must have been one of our agents—Peter Raeside." He crossed the room and picked up some letters lying on a blotting-pad. "This should convince you," he said.

She looked at the envelope, on which was typed the name and address: "Sir Harker Bellamy, 405A, Primrose Gardens, Whitehall."

"Yes, I am convinced. Excuse me for a moment."

She turned and retrieved the collar from its resting-place.

"And now you must hurry," she replied. "I had to leave Mr. Raeside, but he is in very great danger. Will you see to it?"

"Immediately." The man went to the telephone and issued a few instructions, uttered in so low a tone that she could not catch all he said.

"What do you intend to do now, Miss—?" He paused, but she did not give him any name.

"I must see to my own affairs," was the strange answer. "Good night."

CHAPTER NINE — THE WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING

THE sight of the men rushing into the room meant little to Raeside. He felt intuitively he could trust that girl ; he had done all that was possible, and now the rest must be left to Fate.

Through a kind of mist he saw the man who had called himself Radok, but whom he knew as Squatface Foxwell, glare first at the lugubrious-visaged crook who was now staggering to his feet, and then at himself.

As though they had come from a long distance, words drifted to his consciousness.

First :

" What the hell ? " That was the leader exclaiming.

And then the reply of the subordinate :

" There was a girl . . . she got away over the roof. . . . What's the matter. . . ? Couldn't you trust me. . . ? "

" Trust you ! . . . The place is on fire . . . We must get away. . . . "

Then, for the third time that night, Peter Raeside slipped away into deep oblivion.

The girl watched the flames mounting higher and higher. She could wait no longer.

" There's a man up in the top room : you

must save him," she cried, clutching the sleeve of the official who appeared to be in charge.

The latter swung round on her.

"A man up there—are you sure?"

"Quite sure; I left him only a few minutes ago."

A series of sharp, staccato orders was given, and then, with her heart beating wildly, she watched one of the firemen mount a ladder. The temptation came to go with him—and but for the outthrust arm of the official to whom she had spoken, she would have done so.

The agony of the ensuing few minutes! She told herself it was ridiculous to imagine, even for a moment, that she had any more interest in Peter Raeside than the involuntary prompting of sympathy for a fellow-being in dire distress. But when the fireman was seen descending the ladder, holding a limp form in his arms, she could have shouted with relief.

The narrow street was so crowded by this time that she became swallowed up in its maw. She was like a cork on a storm-tossed sea. Gradually she found herself being pressed backwards instead of forwards—and it was not until then that she realised she had to return to her post. The task she had set herself to accomplish was not yet completed. Struggling through the fringe of the crowd, she started to walk resolutely towards Greek Street.

The quietly-spoken clergyman with the kindly face made his offer timorously.

"I don't wish to intrude," he told the Chief

of the Fire Brigade, " but I have my car just round the corner, and if your men would kindly carry this poor fellow to it, some valuable time might be saved."

The man to whom he spoke lifted a smoke-begrimed hand to his forehead and pushed back the helmet.

" That's very good of you, sir—I don't know what's happened to the ambulance. If you wouldn't mind . . ."

" My dear fellow, it's my duty. I can get him to Charing Cross Hospital within a few minutes."

" Very good, sir. 'Ere Joe ! Bill ! . . ."

So it was that when the ambulance arrived, the driver asserting belligerently that he had come just as quickly as was possible, the one victim of the fire was already gone.

" Gone ? " he repeated. " Who the hell took him ? "

" A clergyman."

" What did 'e want muckin' about 'ere for ? "

The Chief of the Fire Brigade, worried out of his usual self-control, sent back a caustic answer.

" He did what you ought to have done—shut up, can't you ? "

" The Priest " was not taking any chances: that was why the body of the injured man was brought in through the back entrance. Poland Jack, recovered by this time from his recent orgy of dope, gave tongue.

" Cripes ! " he exclaimed. " Where did you find him ? "

" The Priest " was in such a good mood that he stopped to enlighten the inquirer ; moreover, as an artist, he was not above the flattery of his fellow men.

" After I had sent that girl to Wendall Street to try to find out what Squatface proposed doing with Raeside, I decided that I had perhaps better take a look-see myself ; so I put on these duds," pointing to the clerical outfit, " and went along. I was just considering the best way of trying to get into the place, when I heard people shouting ' Fire ! ' I followed them, and found that Squatface had either deliberately set light to his new premises, or that an accident had occurred. After that, of course, it was impossible to try to get in—but, waiting until I saw a fireman bring a body down, and being able to recognise that body as belonging to our friend Raeside, I volunteered my help—and here he is."

" Is he dead ? "

" Oh, dear, no. You can't kill a fellow with his vitality so easily as all that. But he wants a doctor badly—he's burned and is still unconscious from the shock. Hallo, my dear ! " the speaker broke off to exclaim as " Lily the Doll " entered. " How did you get on ? "

The newcomer met his suspicious stare with every evidence of confidence.

" All right," she answered ; " I got into the place—but before I could find out anything worth while the whole shoot was alight. Then I thought it was time to be going. I waited about to see what would happen, recognised you in the make-up, saw that you had decided to take

a hand in the game yourself—and came back home. Satisfied ? "

" Perfectly, my dear. I hope you aren't jealous, Jack ? "

The man, who was known to be one of the three heads of the biggest white slave organisation in the world, shook his head.

" Me and the Doll understand each other," he replied. " We're getting to be very good friends—aren't we, Doll ? "

" Of course."

" It's taken some while, but—" and here he grimaced.

The girl could have become hysterical at the insult, but, calling on her reserves, she smiled as though the words had really constituted a compliment.

" Yes," she said, " Poland Jack and I are beginning to understand each other very well. But what happened to the man ? Is he dead ? "

" The Priest " replied.

" No, he's not dead—but he wants a doctor."

" Why not let him die ? " put in Poland Jack.

" Let him die, when he knows as much as would be worth five thousand pounds to us ? No fear ! I want to get him well ; he's got to come through with that secret. Here," turning to the girl, " go and get Dr. Melhuish, down at 343. Say ' The Priest ' wants him to come along here at once. He won't ask you any questions—run along, my dear."

Thankful to escape, the girl nodded and went from the room.

CHAPTER TEN — DR. MELHUISH MAKES A CALL

THE Soho underworld knew Gustave Melhuish as a good friend. Criminals must have their medical adviser just as ordinary citizens—and Melhuish, who some years before had come under the violent displeasure of the British Medical Council, had drifted, as time went on, down to the level of his patients. He was now one of them.

There was nothing that Gustave Melhuish would not do, no act over which he would raise any scruples—no act but one: he made it a practice to point out to his patients that, having been thrown off the Medical Register, he was unable to sign a death certificate. For that, if proved, would have meant jail—and Gustave Melhuish said he was now too old to go to prison.

A short, slightly built man in the sixties, with creased, soiled clothes and a thickish beard stained with snuff, he looked what he was—a thoroughly disreputable doctor, whose proper habitat was the noisome alleys of the district in which he lived and practised.

On this particular night he could have been found seated at an untidy roll-top desk, the pigeonholes of which, if examined, would have been seen to contain not only some very strange but some very disconcerting secrets.

The telephone on the top of the desk gently shrilled. He took off the receiver and listened. The information which came to him over the wire was apparently pleasing, for a smile illumined for a brief moment his grey-toned face.

"Thank you, Raynor," he said, and rang off.

No sooner had he done so than the sound of a jangling bell brought him again to a state of attention. It was late—but, then, he was used to patients who came late; men and women who arrived under cover of the darkness of the night. . . .

His housekeeper having gone for the day, he had to answer that bell himself. Shuffling along the dirty passage, he opened the door and peered out. A strikingly beautiful girl proved to be his visitor.

"Come in, my dear," he said in a croaky voice.

"I don't want to come in: I've brought you a message."

"But it's cold—come in for just a moment."

She did so reluctantly.

"Are you Dr. Melhuish?"

He bowed, and if the visitor had had any time to conjure up a mental picture she would have been able to look back over the vista of years and to see Gustave Melhuish in the days of his prosperity. Then he had been a fashionable physician, practising in the vicinity of Grosvenor Square. Famous men and women had come to his consulting-rooms in Brook Street. But he had made one terrible fatal slip, and, it being discovered, he went over the edge into the abyss.

"'The Priest' wants to see you, Dr. Melhuish," went on the visitor.

"Oh! Then I'll come at once. Just a moment, my dear. . . ."

Putting on a shabby ulster and a cheap tweed cap, he picked up a black doctor's bag and prepared to depart with his charming guide.

"What's the matter?" he inquired as they stepped out into the street.

"There's been a fire."

"A fire? Where?"

"I can't tell you any more—but 'The Priest' said he wanted you to come at once."

Dr. Gustave Melhuish kept his head down as he listened to the information passed to him by "The Priest." Then, fumbling in a pocket, he brought out a pair of dark glasses.

"My sight isn't what it used to be," he vouchsafed.

His examination of the injured man was quick and seemed thorough.

"He's very bad," he said, raising himself. "If he stays here he will die."

"The Priest" exploded.

"But he *must* stay here. You've got to attend to him on the spot. Damn you, Melhuish. That's why I sent for you!"

The other bent over his bag.

"Very well; I'll do what I can; but I take no responsibility, remember. And leave me with him: if he recovers consciousness and finds you here, the shock, in his present state might kill him."

The other left, grumbling. There was something peculiar in the manner of the derelict doctor that night; he could not decide exactly what it was.

The strong stimulant made Raeside open his eyes. He stared in bewildered fashion at the man bending over him.

"You must keep quiet," he was told; "you're in a bad state, but you'll get better. Soon an ambulance will arrive and you will be taken to hospital. Keep quiet, I tell you."

It was a different voice speaking now from the one that had addressed "The Priest." This second voice held sympathy, strength, confidence and a good many other qualities. It was the voice, indeed, of a masterful character and not of a man who had slipped down the slope until he had reached the lowest possible depths.

Still staring, the patient obeyed his command and slipped back once again into unconsciousness. The shock had been too much for his tortured nerves.

Gustave Melhuish waited. He was terribly worried about his patient's condition, but he knew it would not be long now . . .

Nor was he mistaken.

The door was suddenly flung open and "The Priest" entered; he was still wearing his bogus clergyman's clothes.

"Clear out—the police are here," cried the crook.

"Not the police, but my own men," was the very curious reply.

" What the hell do you mean ? "

But when, with a swift movement of his hand, Melhuish removed his beard, a greater fear than any he had previously known dawned in " The Priest's " eyes. He gaped.

" Put your hands up ! " barked Sir Harker Bellamy, covering the now terror-stricken crook with a revolver.

CHAPTER ELEVEN "LILY THE DOLL" EXPLAINS

PETER, as he moved his hand, felt himself touching cool linen. Then he opened his eyes. A nurse was standing by the side of the bed in which he found himself lying. It was all very puzzling—almost as puzzling as any of the previous strange events that had preceded this *dénouement.*

"Where——?"

The nurse, who he noticed was very attractive, having a dimple in each cheek when she smiled, put up a warning forefinger.

"I'll do the talking," she said. "You're in a nursing home in Manchester Square. You're getting on splendidly. Yes," as the patient quietly groaned, "I know you're still in considerable pain, but people who are foolish enough to get mixed up in fires are apt to get burnt, you know," she added with a rallying smile.

"Fire?" His memory had failed him.

"The doctor will be here any minute now," she said, in the manner of one who has already talked too much; "but," coming nearer and smoothing the top sheet, "you haven't a single thing in the world to worry about—I promise you that."

During the short time that elapsed between the nurse leaving the room and a brisk young

man of about his own age entering, recollection returned to Raeside vividly. As he stared at the window on the opposite side of the small room, the hazards through which he had passed—how long ago was it?—unwound themselves like a series of scenes in a film. He remembered going with "The Priest" to that sinister house in Greek Street, his encounter with Kuhn, the gigantic one-eyed negro; recovering consciousness to find himself in the hands of another band of captors; and then, blotting out everything else in point of significance, the girl to whom he had entrusted the collar. . . .

Had she got safely through to Sir Harker Bellamy? But she must have done. Otherwise——

"Well, how's the patient this morning?" inquired a cheery voice that radiated confidence.

"I suppose you're the doctor?"

"Yes, I'm the doctor. And, judging from the progress you're making, my friend, not such a bad doctor at that!" went on the visitor. "Now, let me see . . ."

Followed several minutes of examination and medical talk. At the end:

"You have been very ill, Raeside; but now everything is going to be all right. We've had to give you a lot of dope to keep you quiet and to ease the pain, but there have been no after-effects, and you'll leave this place just as good a man physically as you were before all this hullaballoo happened."

"Thanks, doctor."

"Well, I'm not going to say I've been a slouch on this job, because I haven't. You've made me sweat blood, my boy, but the net result is that you're regarded here as a star patient for all concerned. Incidentally, you'll be able to get up in a few days now. If you want anything, tell the nurse—she's a good sort and passing fair to gaze upon . . . Well, good-bye; I'll be in again this evening."

It was an encouraging report, and for half an hour after the doctor had gone Peter lay back on his pillows, very well content. Then a disturbing vision swam into his ken; he saw a beautiful face, the principal features of which were a pair of dark-brown eyes and a mouth whose charm he had noticed even when lying in that hellish attic of Wendell Street.

How could such a girl be a crook? It distressed him to think that she was a criminal—an associate of men like "The Priest" and that filthy hound called Poland Jack. To imagine her living in the same house as Kuhn . . .!

The opening of the door broke in upon his reflections. It was the nurse; she was smiling with the result that both dimples showed simultaneously.

"Mr. Raeside, the doctor said that you could receive visitors to-day. Do you feel up to it?"

Visitors! It must be "The Mole."

"Yes, rather. Show him in, will you?"

The nurse smiled again, this time displaying not only both dimples but dazzlingly white teeth.

"All right," she said; "just stay a moment."

But when the door opened the second time it

was not Sir Harker Bellamy who walked through it. Very much the contrary; in fact this visitor was a girl—a girl the very sight of whom set Peter Raeside's heart thumping beneath his silk pyjama jacket.

"I can stay ten minutes—if you would like me to."

Yes, it was the girl all right—but somehow she was different; very different. In fact, she appeared to be a different personality altogether.

"What's happened to you?" he asked. There were many other parts of the puzzle to be solved, but this seemed the most important; at least, for the moment.

"I came first of all to see how you were," she answered. "Questions, if you like, can come later."

"I'm fine," he told her; "the doctor was in just now and he said I should be up in a few days. In the meantime, I had nothing whatever to worry about—isn't it good news?"

Although she was still a comparative stranger, he spoke as though she might have been an old friend; for that was the feeling he had—that the two of them had known each other for a very long time and that now they had come together again in the most natural way possible.

"Yes, it is fine," she said.

After that there was a silence. It was the girl who broke it.

"I don't know if you're sufficiently interested to want to listen to it," she remarked, "but"—and then stopped.

"You took the collar to Sir Harker Bellamy?"

She nodded.

"Yes; I gave it to his secretary. After that I don't know what happened, until a lot of men raided the house in Greek Street and took Poland Jack, 'The Priest' and others off to jail."

"They left you?"

She nodded.

"Yes; somehow or other they didn't think I really belonged to the gang. Stupid of them, wasn't it?"

He looked at her intently.

"I never really thought you belonged."

She put out a hand to touch his pillow.

"I'm glad to hear you say that," she said; "not that it matters, of course——"

"It matters a great deal—in fact, it matters a tremendous amount. Just before you came in I was thinking of you."

She prompted him.

"Wondering what I was doing in that house in Greek Street, I suppose?"

"To tell you the truth, yes."

"Well, here is the explanation: I feel you have a right to be told. My name is Marjorie Garwood and I'm not a crook at all."

"I knew it!" he declared triumphantly.

"Did you? I wonder . . . Now let me go on," as he seemed about to interrupt her again. "Perhaps it will bore you," she continued, looking at her watch.

"Bore me. Don't be silly. You mustn't go."

"Why not?"

"Because both the doctor and all the nurses

would complain that I had had a serious relapse in consequence."

The girl smiled.

"I couldn't allow that to happen, of course," she said.

There was a brief pause, and Raeside took advantage of it to study her delightful profile. Here was a girl, he thought—and then reminded himself that really he had no right to think at all . . .

"I was on a cruise," the girl continued. "The boat stopped at Monte Carlo, and the dearest friend I had in the world—a girl of twenty-one—and I went on shore to lunch. Phyllis, my friend, disappeared after going to wash her hands—and she's never been seen again."

"I'm sorry," stated Raeside.

"Thank you. But now that I've started I must finish my story. When I got back to London, after abandoning the rest of the trip, because I was still hopeful that I might run across my friend, information came from a most unexpected source that in all probability Phyllis had fallen into the hands of white slavers."

"Good God!"

"Thank you," said the girl again. "You can imagine what agonies of mind I went through. Well, a week later I managed to get an introduction to a woman who was intimately connected with the League of Nations Committee, who were endeavouring so courageously to put a stop to this hideous traffic. I volunteered my services- —"

"For what?" demanded his listener.

"For anything. During the last three months," the girl went on, "I have lived in the Underworld. I have mixed with men and women who buy human flesh and sell it at an astounding profit. I have taken the most appalling risks, of course, but"—and here her voice dropped—"I've come out comparatively unscathed."

"Didn't they suspect you?"

"No. At least, I can truthfully say that only once did I feel in any danger. But I had to have my wits about me all the time; I had to be prepared for any emergency. Yet it was worth it," she continued, folding her hands, "because the information I was able to bring away from that house in Greek Street proved invaluable to my employers. The man Poland Jack, who lived there with 'The Priest,' was one of the three kings, as they were called, of the entire European Traffic."

"I scarcely know what to tell you," was Raeside's comment. "You'll think me banal, no doubt, if I say I have a most tremendous admiration for what you've done; and, besides," he went on quickly, "I haven't thanked you yet for your help——"

Her retort was surprising.

"But Sir Harker Bellamy has already done that," she said.

"Bellamy? You've met Bellamy?"

She nodded.

"We had lunch together yesterday. I found him delightful. He said quite a number of nice things about you—of course, he ought to. By the way, he talked about coming along

here this morning . . . Why," turning, " here he is ! "

That distinguished director of British Intelligence, known throughout the chancelleries of Europe as " The Mole," held out his hand as he approached the bed.

" Good work, Peter," he said—" damned good work. When you're up and about again I'll see that it's not forgotten. I notice you two have already made friends. Well," with a quizzical smile softening the lines in his grim face, " that, perhaps, is as it should be. Miss Garwood thinks of joining my staff, Peter."

" The hell she does !—Oh, I'm sorry," looking at the girl.

The latter acknowledged the apology, but did not appear displeased.

" I suppose I must become used to the idea of strong language if I join the British Secret Service," she said. " Have you any objection, Mr. Raeside ? "

" None whatever ; in fact, I'm delighted."

" You didn't exactly sound like it just now."

There was a cough.

" I happen to be a rather busy man," broke in Sir Harker Bellamy, " so I'll ask you kindly to postpone your present argument until I've gone."

" Certainly, sir," replied Raeside. " But there's one thing I'd like to know beforehand."

" Yes ? "

" By what miracle did you happen to turn up at the house of ' The Priest ' that night ? "

" The Mole " pulled out a cigarette case, and

then, remembering where he was, put it back in his pocket.

"That's easily told," he said. "I can't let you young fellows have all the fun. I'd been keeping my eye on Dr. Gustave Melhuish for some considerable time, and when your usual report didn't come through that evening I decided to pay a call on him. I have my methods, as you know, and it was entirely due to these that I was enabled to take his place for a few hours."

"So it was *you* who came back with me?" interjected the girl.

"Yes, my dear. I kept that piece of information back as a surprise."

"Just two questions more, sir, if you can spare the time," went on Raeside.

"I can give you another three minutes. What are they?"

"The first is, why did Squareface Foxwell call himself Radok; and the second, was the information which that poor chap Lessing wrote on the collar worth all the fuss?"

"The answer to the first inquiry," replied "The Mole," "is merely conjecture, but I imagine that the man Foxwell, taken unawares, said the first thing that came into his mind. In other words, he was bluffing. The answer to your second question, my boy, is yes—a thousand times . . . And now I must be going."

He left two deeply interested people behind him.

THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP

CHAPTER ONE — BANANA SKINS IN COVENT GARDEN

SINCLAIR stopped, side-stepped like a boxer, hugged the dark doorway with his lithe body—and waited. Ever since he had left Kingsway and plunged into the network of mean, sordid streets leading to Covent Garden, he had had the impression that he was being dogged. He knew from experience that there were quite a number of reasons why a well-dressed man should be followed through London streets, and, not liking any of them, he decided on a show-down. He wanted to make sure that his assumption was correct.

He was not left long in doubt.

Two heavily-built, lurching figures walked quickly past. As they did so, one of them spat out an oath.

"Where the unprintable has he gone?" queried the other.

Life was a lark to Hugh Sinclair. For one thing, he was at that age—twenty-five next June—and for another, his sense of humour was of the irrepressible type—which explains in some measure why he now broke into a laugh.

It was wrong tactics, of course. The two men, who, he was convinced by this time, had been trailing him, turned swiftly in their tracks.

"Here he is, Bill!" cried the foremost.

Bill, no laggard, was almost as quick as his companion—but Sinclair was the quickest of all. As the nearest assailant produced from his overcoat pocket what looked like a loaded stick, Hugh took a flying kick with his left foot and connected with the man's elbow joint. At what seemed almost the same moment to the belligerents, Sinclair's right fist rapped home on the man's already maltreated nose. There was a gush of gore, a loud, explosive oath, a dull thud as the weapon he had been holding a moment before fell to the pavement—and then : *Thurrp ! Thurrp !* The leader of the gang had been very effectively put out of action. It was quick, neat work, and Sinclair, had he had time, might have passed himself a vote of thanks for doing the job so well.

But he didn't have the time. Brother Bill, in spite of feeling that something had gone radically wrong with the works, did his best to make up the deficiency. But, as he came swinging into the attack, the altogether surprising young man he intended to hit hell out of ducked, caught his right leg in a vice-like grip and—*whoosh !*

After turning what looked like a complete somersault, Brother Bill landed head down, occupied this surprising position for a full second, and then skidded as though his pate had encountered a blasé banana-skin.

Leaving them to it, Sinclair strolled on.

Twenty minutes later he was ringing a bell at a top stairs flat in York Buildings, Adelphi. It does not take twenty minutes for an active

young man to traverse the short distance between Covent Garden Market and this desirable and picturesque-looking thoroughfare in the heart of the now-threatened Adelphi. But Hugh had taken a circuitous route. Although he had literally wiped the floor with those two loungers of the night, he did not forget that his recent assailants possibly had reinforcements. But, having exercised the utmost care, he arrived at the rooms of his Chief fairly certain that he had encountered no further suspicious loiterers.

The flat door was opened by a middle-aged manservant, who gave him a smiling greeting.

"Sir Harker in?" he asked.

"He's expecting you, Mr. Sinclair."

"Good! Just tell him I'm on the way, will you?"

But youth could not be restrained, and long before the servant had had time to make the announcement, Sinclair had opened the door of the familiar room and had blown in much after the style of a human volcano.

A short, quietly dressed man with a grey, lined face looked up from some papers he had been reading.

"One of these days, Sinclair," he said caustically, "you'll come in here so quickly that you'll be out through the other wall before I have time to collect the pieces."

The young man grinned.

"Sorry, Chief, but I happen to be in rather a hurry."

"So I notice. Incidentally," looking at his

watch, "you're also ten minutes before your appointment."

"I couldn't wait, Sir Harker. Something rather funny occurred in Covent Garden just now. I don't know, of course, if any importance can be attached to it——"

"You'd better tell me, I think."

"Righto!"

The Chief of that branch of the British Intelligence known as Q.1 listened attentively until the narrator had come to an end.

"Nice work," he said in commendation; and then: "Can you give any detailed description of the men?"

Sinclair shook his head.

"Afraid I can't. You see, it was pretty dark, and they both wore caps pulled well down over their eyes. I suppose they thought I had some money on me——"

He stopped because of the expression in Sir Harker Bellamy's face.

"That may or may not be the solution," remarked the Chief of Q.1. "Personally, I don't think it is."

"Then what's your idea, Chief?"

Bellamy turned in his swivel chair.

"Got a pipe on you?" he asked irrelevantly.

"Yes, Chief—why?"

"Smoke it," said the older man succinctly; "I've a story to tell you." Picking up a battered briar himself from the desk at which he had been working, he filled it with some unholy-looking black twist he took from a tin, lit up and blew a pungent cloud of smoke.

"Ever heard of 'The Priest'?" he inquired.

Sinclair took the pipe out of his mouth.

"That's Peter Raeside's pigeon, isn't it? Wasn't that the fellow he had that merry scrap with in Greek Street about six months ago?"

Bellamy nodded.

"Yes," he said reflectively; "and the end of 'that merry scrap' was that I handed Mr. Priest over to Scotland Yard. But something happened after the transfer; by some means which has never been satisfactorily explained, this very dangerous criminal managed to get out of England——"

"You mean he's back in London now?"

"I shouldn't be surprised; I shouldn't be at all surprised. There's plenty of scope at the present time for a crook with the genius of 'The Priest.'"

The young Secret Service man took up a more comfortable position in his chair.

"If you can spare the time, Sir Harker, I'd like you to tell me all there is to know about this bloke. Somehow, I think the information would be useful."

Without replying, Bellamy turned to his desk again and, opening a drawer on the right-hand side, took out a folder.

"Here is a very good photograph of 'The Priest,'" he stated, swinging round to face Sinclair. "It's a face worth studying," he added.

The latest recruit to Q.1 followed the injunction so well that it was not until three minutes had passed that he handed the photograph back.

"What a mug!" he commented in a tone of awe. "Why, he looks like a saint turned into a devil."

"That's exactly what he is," came the rejoinder. "'The Priest,' whose real name is Raymond Clement Vance, is an unfrocked clergyman—a man who from his youth up has developed, perhaps against his will, an incalculable amount of evil, with the result that now he is a thoroughly vicious person. According to information which I have received recently, Vance is supposed to have entered the priesthood at an early age in the hope of overcoming this evil side of his nature. Whether or not that story is true, I cannot say: I do know, however, that he is the most dangerous criminal—or, at least, certainly one of the two most dangerous criminals—I have ever met."

"He looks about fifty in that photograph."

"Yes, I should say that is roughly his age. He is tall—at least five feet eleven—and of spare, athletic build. He has white, delicate hands with long fingers. As you notice from the photograph, his face is thin and ascetic-looking. His eyes are piercing, and, out of compliment to his former vocation, he makes a point of dressing in a neat dark-grey suit, which, as you know, is the mufti of a clergyman.

"Because he is my deadly enemy, and because, now you have joined my staff, it's quite likely that you will be running against him sooner or later, I think it is just as well that you should know these facts. He often poses as a man who considers it his duty to help derelicts (that is how Raeside got into touch

with him over the previous affair), and it is in this way that he recruits fresh members to his organisation. We closed up his head-quarters in Greek Street six months ago, but he has another hideaway somewhere, without any doubt."

"That is, assuming, of course, Chief, that he *has* come back to London." Then, as the thought struck him, Sinclair added: "Do you imagine that my business to-night had anything to do with 'The Priest'?"

"It may have done," was the grave reply.

"But he doesn't know me."

Bellamy leaned forward, his eyes fixed on the younger man.

"Haven't I told you that 'The Priest' is my deadly enemy?" he said. "If he has come back to England, then one of the first tasks he would set himself would be to gather information about everyone who works for me."

"Yes, of course; I hadn't thought of that," replied Sinclair somewhat shamefacedly. "Well, I'll promise you that I'll be on the look-out for the blighter in any case."

"As he will be on the look-out for you, my boy."

For a couple of minutes the words, which seemed to fill the room with a sense of stealthy menace, had a distinctly sobering effect on the listener. But Hugh Sinclair's ebullience could not be repressed for long.

"You should have seen that cove skid on the banana-skin, Chief," he roared. "He landed clean on the top of his nut and ricochetted like a billiard ball that had 'side' on it."

"It must have been very amusing," commented Bellamy with the ghost of a smile.

For the next twenty minutes the two discussed the subject which had brought Sinclair to the flat. At the end of this time the Chief of Q.1 bade his young companion good night.

After Sinclair had gone, Bellamy smoked another pipe of his villainous tobacco. He liked this youngster, who promised well. Sinclair was the type he was always anxious to enlist in his department. An all-round athlete of surprising skill—Sinclair had even done a bit of all-in wrestling, could box, handle a swordstick as well as a revolver, and knew quite a lot about jiu-jitsu—the lad had proved himself on more than one occasion.

It had been an inborn love of adventure that had brought Sinclair to Q.1. Well-born, well-educated, with excellent social connections—he believed he was about to be engaged to the daughter of Sir Franklyn Bertram, First Lord of the Admiralty—the young man had decided against the Diplomatic Service in order that he might join the Intelligence.

Although he believed in "blooding" his boys, "The Mole," as this grey little man was known to his associates, hoped that Sinclair would not run across "The Priest" too soon in his career. Yet the affair that night was suspicious.

Then, plunging himself into work again, he put the incident out of his mind.

CHAPTER TWO — A STRANGE PROPOSAL

TWENTY-FOUR hours after he had left Sir Harker Bellamy's flat in the Adelphi, Hugh Sinclair, presenting a sight to charm any feminine eye, caught both hands of the pretty girl who ran to meet him and gave her what he would have himself termed the " once-over."

Not that this piece of modern slang did justice to the look of affection directed at Susan Bertram. He had been in love with Sue for the past six months—since the first moment he had met her, as a matter of fact—and he believed that she returned his regard. But, because of the immense wealth which one day she would inherit from her mother, as well as the fact that, on account of her close relationship with the important politician who at this time was directing the naval destinies of Great Britain, Sue received far more attention than was perhaps strictly good for her, he had not pushed himself. Never one for joining in a crowd, he had preferred to await developments. If Sue's liking for him was the right kind, she would betray her feelings sooner or later—yes, even in spite of the fact of being the most beparagraphed girl of 1934 ! Although so apparently superficial, Hugh was by no means a shallow thinker. He could tell the real from the dross right enough. In fact, his critics—

and, like most people worth while, he had his critics—would have been surprised had they realised how shrewd he could be on occasions.

He was speaking in his usual jesting tone now.

"Well, Light of my Eyes, how are things going?"

"Splendidly! Hugh, although it's daddy's, I don't think I've ever been to such a gorgeous party." She drew him a little on one side. "Do you know who's here?"

"Don't tell me the Prime Minister—because I loathe the sight of the creature."

"Don't be silly: it's someone far more important than the Prime Minister."

"Is it possible?" he countered. "Well, my girl, don't keep me in suspense like this. Who's the star turn?"

She lowered her voice.

"The Maharajah of Kutani! I've already danced with him once . . ."

"The deuce you have!" Unconsciously he frowned.

Susan Bertram would have been less than feminine if the sight of that frown had not given her a sense of pleasure. She had been waiting for an open declaration of love on the part of Hugh Sinclair for at least three months, and had been periodically disappointed that it had not been forthcoming. Of far too gentle a nature to wish to cause him pain through provoking jealousy, yet she thought the present occasion a very opportune one for urging the man she loved to the attack. Which was why she said now:

"See you later. I must fly."

Hugh watched her disappearing figure broodingly.

H.H. the Maharajah of Kutani was declared by the majority of the British Press to be one of the world's most colourful personalities—no joke intended. To begin with, he ruled over a small but highly important Indian state —Kutani occupied a valuable strategic position on the North-West Frontier—he was supposed to be fabulously rich, and, to crown all from the "human interest" point of view, he was a bachelor. What more did the popular newspapers require to make them splash the Maharajah's name on the front page at every conceivable opportunity?

Wondrously attired in full native dress, and wearing sufficient gems to stock a Bond Street jeweller's, the Maharajah was easily the most conspicuous figure at the ball. Attended by three members of his suite, he had accepted the invitation of the First Lord of the Admiralty for purely politic reasons. He had expected to be bored, but this state of mental languor had disappeared immediately his host introduced him to Susan Bertram. This young English girl, with her flawless skin, vivacious manner and supple figure, caused his extremely susceptible heart to put on a spurt . . .

It was whilst they were dancing for the second time—five minutes after Susan had left Hugh Sinclair—that the Maharajah allowed the first sign of his ardour to betray him.

"I want to talk to you, Miss Bertram," he

said in his flawless English. "There is something of importance I wish to say. Can you take me somewhere quiet?"

Susan hesitated for a moment. There was an intensity about his voice and an animation in his dark face that vaguely alarmed her. She remembered having read somewhere or other that the Maharajah had come to Europe with the avowed intention of taking back an English wife—was it possible . . . ? But that, of course, was too absurd. She might joke about this Indian prince to Hugh Sinclair—but that was a very different matter from listening to a proposal of marriage.

Still, possessed by an impish sense of mischief, she felt it would be rather fun to listen to what he had to say to her. It must be important, otherwise he would not have shown that momentary lack of self-control.

Speaking in a casual tone, she answered him.

"We can go in the conservatory and smoke a cigarette if you like." How old-fashioned it sounded now—the conservatory! But then, Admiralty House *was* old-fashioned.

"That will be delightful."

It was when the two of them were seated in wicker chairs and the cigarettes had been lighted that Sue felt her hand suddenly seized. Before she could recover from her astonishment the tense voice was pouring passionate words into her ear.

"My beautiful Miss Bertram! Love comes so swiftly—it is like a swallow's flight—or the sharp sweep of a sword——"

She could have giggled, but instead said:

"My hand—I want to use it again, you know."

He did not release her fingers but raised them to his lips.

"I want you to try to understand the passionate nature of the East, Miss Bertram. It will sound impossible to your Western mind, no doubt, but the moment I saw you I knew that I was looking at my future wife."

She stared at him as though he were mad. What a preposterous situation! It was like a scene in one of those ridiculous American films.

She rose to her feet.

"I'm very sorry, but I couldn't possibly become your wife, Your Highness."

His face, avid before, now turned sullen.

"What is that you tell me?" he asked in a low tone.

"That you really mustn't waste any further thought on me, Maharajah. I'm greatly honoured and all that, of course—but I couldn't possibly become your wife."

"And why not?"

"Well, primarily, because I don't believe in mixed marriages. The thought is rather—"

"Abhorrent to you?"

"Well, yes, since you appear to want to know the truth." She felt like adding something more, but kept back the words. This man of forty, with his paunchy figure and too-fat face, prominent features of which were a hooked nose and sensual lips (not to mention the smallish, peering eyes), was not the mate of whom she had dreamed—not by a "whole jugful," as Hugh might have put it. Dear old

Hugh! What a shame to keep him waiting! What a contrast he presented to this dark-skinned potentate, who, judging by his manner, appeared to think that he could place all the world in fee.

"If you will excuse me now——"

"Of course; you have your other guests . . ." His eyes smouldered as she walked quickly away.

A couple of minutes later Sue was clinging to the arm of the man she loved.

"Hugh!" she said.

"What's the matter, Bobkins? Had a fright?"

"Yes; the Maharajah of Kutani has just asked me to marry him."

"Holy cocoanuts! Likewise, jazzing hambones! What in the name of Ethiopia are we coming to? What did you say, child?"

"Just that I couldn't." It was the way she looked up at him that made Hugh take her in his arms.

"Darling child!"

They snuggled closer.

"Oh, Hugh, hold me tightly . . . I'm afraid—"

"What?"

"I'm afraid—I'm afraid."

"Of Mr. Bones in the minstrel troupe? Nonsense!"

But neither of them was able to read the future.

CHAPTER THREE — "THE PRIEST" RECEIVES

H.H. THE MAHARAJAH OF KUTANI was listening intently to the news his emissary had brought back, and his state of mind was evidenced by the ceaseless tapping of his fingers on the arm of the chair.

"I am to go to-night—to a place called Highgate. That is where he lives."

"How do you know this?"

"My master, I learned it from the man called Gabriel Mendoza. He is what they call in England a 'fence'—he sells the proceeds of robberies."

"Does he know this man, 'The Priest'?"

The emissary bowed low.

"He says he is in his fullest confidence. It has been hard work, my master."

"You shall be rewarded. Go to this place to-night and tell him what is in my mind. Ask him what price he wants—but say that I never pay without getting results. Is it understood?"

"Yes, my master."

The emissary was afraid.

This was an entirely different undertaking from any he had negotiated for the Marahajah in Kutani. There, intrigue flourished side by side with the most violent crime—but in the

bazaars and palaces of his master he knew exactly where he stood. Conditions were so different in England. He shivered as he recalled the many hours he had spent in the labyrinths of Soho, endeavouring to find a way to reach this master criminal whom the Maharajah wished to employ. It had only been through exercising endless patience and utilising the most devious means that he had been able to achieve his object.

Now that he was actually on his way to meet this Western man of evil, he felt afraid—afraid for himself as well as for his project. But there had been no other way. Directly he had entered the motor-car in that quiet street near theatreland, a large silk handkerchief had been placed over his eyes and he had been warned not to disturb it.

Although the car was travelling at a fast pace, the time seemed endless. He felt his teeth chattering—it was so cold to-night. How he wished he were back in sun-soaked Kutani! Only the terrible fear he had of the Maharajah kept him from shouting that he would not go any farther.

At last the car stopped.

"This is where you get out," he was told.

Once his feet touched the earth, someone took each arm. He appeared to be walking up what they called in England a "drive" and then he felt carpet beneath him and knew himself to be in a house.

"You know what a lift is? Well, you're going in one now." This came from the man on his right.

His inside seemed to turn to water as what had been solid a moment before slipped violently downwards. But for the warning he had been given he must have cried out in fright.

When the infernal machine stopped, he was taken for another walk, each of his arms being gripped as before. Then, quite suddenly, out of the darkness a voice gave a command:

"Take the bandage off."

When he was able to adjust his vision to the blinding light, he saw a man sitting at a wide desk. In the front of this man blazed a powerful electric lamp, the rays of which had been focused on his face. The features of the man were in gloom, but his voice was compelling.

"You are from the Maharajah of Kutani?"

"Yes—from my master."

A hand was waved and the two men who had accompanied him to this place fell back. The emissary looked round. This man of evil must have much money, he decided, for the walls of the room were covered with handsomely bound books. The furniture, too, was such as he had seen in the great houses of London when accompanying the Maharajah on visits. The carpet was so thick that his feet sank into it; there was the smell of good tobacco in the air.

He felt more assured.

"Why have you come to me?" asked the man, whose face remained in the shadow.

Before replying the emissary looked suspiciously at the two men who stood by the door.

"It's all right; you needn't be afraid," he was told.

Because he wanted this ordeal over as quickly as possible, he began to speak rapidly.

"Oh, sir, listen now to the words of my master. He has fallen in love with a beautiful English girl and wishes to take her back to his royal palaces in Kutani."

"The name of the girl?"

"Her name, sir, is Susan Bertram."

"Susan Bertram! Your master flies high."

"My master is all-powerful. But this lady will not return his love. That makes my master angry, and he tells me to seek someone who will take the lady away from her father."

"You mean kidnap her?"

"Yes, I think that is the word you Westerns use. My master wishes to know how much money you would require to do this thing for him."

There was no bargaining.

"Tell him ten thousand pounds."

The emissary bowed.

"My master also says that I must tell you he does not pay without getting the results."

"Tell him in return that I guarantee results. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir, I think so."

"All right. Then you can go back to the Maharajah and tell him what I have told you."

"But how is it to be done? My master will wish to know that too."

"Tell him I will make what arrangements are necessary."

"Oh, sir, very well." The emissary bowed before being taken away. As he left the room his eyes were bandaged afresh.

The man who, since his return to England, had set up in business as a crime consultant de luxe, leaned back in his padded chair and found an added fragrance to his recently lit cigar.

Ten thousand pounds! It was a stiff fee, but all these Maharajahs were lousy with money, and it was only right that they should be made to pay for their whims. But this particular specimen, as he had said, aimed high—he wanted the daughter of perhaps the most powerful politician in the Cabinet at the present time. Well, that could be arranged, of course . . . As he continued to speculate, "The Priest's" fine, ascetic features twisted themselves into a satanic smile. Here was an opportunity for getting his own back on the man who had outwitted him six months before. He should like to see Sir Harker Bellamy's face when the news broke loose that the only daughter of Sir Franklyn Bertram had disappeared into space!

Bellamy! To get his revenge on this malignant enemy he had taken the risk of returning to England. He was wanted in London; there were many clients only too anxious to pay well for his brains. When the planning of a big crime proved too much for them, then they came to him as a consultant. His fees were so heavy that already he looked like amassing a fortune. But money was one thing—and revenge another. In this latest commission he saw an opportunity of humiliating the Chief of Q.1 that might not again present itself for many years.

Secure in this new stronghold of his at

Highgate—he had converted a derelict mansion into what was a near approach (at least, so far as the underground portions were concerned) to a fortress—he felt he could laugh not only at the Secret Service but at Scotland Yard. They would have some difficulty in penetrating to his present burrow. The iron handle of this study door was connected with the house mains through a high-ratio transformer producing a high-tension voltage of over ten thousand volts, so that any unauthorised person who touched it would be instantly killed. The only approach to the room was by a narrow stone passage, the roof of which was pierced with holes. Once in this passage, any undesirable person could be trapped by a stout door at each end and drowned by water which poured from the holes above. After the water had been let out through the main drain, the corpse could be quickly reduced to ashes when placed in an electric furnace. Yes, he reflected again, sniffing with renewed appreciation his Corona cigar, he felt reasonably secure against any intrusion. Let Bellamy come!

The telephone on his table tinkled.

"Yes?" he inquired sharply; but the expression on his face changed when he heard the answer. "Bring him along," he ordered.

The second visitor to the stronghold that night proved to be a thick-set individual, wearing clothes of a foreign cut, who regarded "The Priest" with a cold stare not unlike that of a snake. This chilling scrutiny was met, however, with an affable smile.

"Good evening——"

"No—no names, please," returned the newcomer.

"I'm sorry, but that does not prevent me from remarking how pleased I am to see you."

"Wait until you've heard what I've got to say."

"I'm quite confident on that score."

The words appeared to anger the other.

"You've got the cheek of the devil."

"So my critics say. However," pushing forward a box of cigars, "don't let's start the meeting with recriminations."

The man sank his heavy weight into a chair, bit off the end of his cigar, lit it and blew clouds of smoke fiercely from between his thick lips.

"I've only just heard that you were back," he said, and again his manner was accusing.

"I was waiting to hear from you. I didn't know, of course, until this morning that our relations were going to be continued."

The man slewed round on him.

"Listen," he said harshly, "Kuhnreich is going to give you one more chance."

At the mention of the Dictator of Ronstadt "The Priest" raised his fine eyebrows.

"He's going to give me one more chance—how do you know I'm prepared to take it? The trouble with me, Krieg," he went on, a faint insolence in his voice, "is that I am overwhelmed with commissions already—simply overwhelmed. Crime is in such a flourishing state in London that, now I have come back, I am deluged with offers. I do not know that acting as a spy—no matter how highly paid—

for Ronstadt appeals to me any longer. I much prefer straight crookery."

The man who had come to see him that night laid his cigar on the edge of the table.

"All right," he replied. "Now listen to me for a moment: I had a message from Kuhnreich an hour ago to the effect that he's got a tremendously important job for you, and, believe me, it will pay you to do it."

"The Priest" ignored the menacing tone.

"But I have so many important jobs," he countered; "only a few minutes ago, as a matter of fact, a man stood in this room and offered me ten thousand pounds for a few hours' work. What do you say to that, Krieg?"

The other rose lumberingly.

"Did you ever hear what happened to the man Matson?" he inquired. "Once in the spy business, my friend—and you have to remain in it, or go out." The gesture which accompanied the last words was significant. The speaker placed the dead end of his cigar against his forehead as though it might have been a revolver. "You ought to know that," he continued, in the manner of a schoolmaster addressing a backward child.

"The Priest" considered.

Then:

"Sit down, Krieg. We know each other too well to quarrel, I hope?"

The other grunted, but lowered himself once again into the chair.

"What is the job?" asked "The Priest."

"That's better; now you're being sensible.

No one can listen in to what we're saying, I suppose?"

"Not even the devil," was the answer. "For anyone even to approach this room without authority from me means certain death. Now!"

The other took a deep pull at his cigar before he started. It was as though he wanted to refresh himself before a trying task.

"Living in a Surrey village at the present time," he said, "is a young inventor named Brand. He is a genius. According to information which has reached me, he has actually perfected a device which he calls 'The Brand Protector.' This, put into non-technical language, is a new kind of electric current which has the effect of deflecting air bombs aimed at battleships from aeroplanes. No doubt you are beginning to understand?" he inquired, looking keenly at the other.

"My wits are as sharp as usual," was the complacent answer.

"Very well. Now, since you've been away from England, secret trials have been held—I nearly got to one of them myself—at which, according to our information, this invention was tried out with the greatest possible success. Ronstadt, which, as you know, has the largest air force in Europe, will have her chief war weapon neutralised unless particulars of this device can be procured."

"And I am to be the one to procure them—is that it?"

"Exactly."

"What's the price?"

"Anything in reason — say twenty-five thousand pounds."

"I'll consider it."

"You'll give me your answer before I leave this room." The visitor's tone had become belligerent again.

The smooth voice of "The Priest" caressed the electrically charged atmosphere.

"You will agree, I hope, Krieg," he said, "that I have been a very courteous host up till now?"

"What are you driving at?"

"Nothing, my dear fellow. I was merely remarking that I trust my attitude towards you has left nothing to be desired up to the present time. But there is an end to my patience, Krieg—and I'm not so sure I haven't reached it now. A few minutes ago, when I suggested that I might be inclined to leave the espionage corps of the Ronstadt Government you—forgive me if I offend—very crudely made a gesture suggesting that, if I carried my idea into practice, I should be—shall we say 'removed'? In other words, a revolver would be placed by the side of my head and what brains I possess would be blown to the four winds. Am I correct?"

"You always were too fond of talking."

"But, my dear Krieg, conversation has become one of the lost arts. That is why I am doing my poor best to try to revive it. But I was saying . . . Now, here is my final word: for the sum of thirty thousand pounds I may be persuaded to get you the device in question—or as many particulars as possible—but

understand me, I will not be threatened. No, although Kuhnreich might send to England the entire force of his secret police, including the redoubtable Crosber, I shall refuse to be intimidated in any way. You can tell him that with my compliments."

"You realise what you are doing?"

"Perfectly."

"Then you are a big fool."

"On the contrary, I am a great genius. So great that, merely by raising this right hand"—doing so—"I could ensure that you never left this room alive. What do you say to that, my dear Krieg?"

The threat had its effect: the fat belly of the man shook; his tone changed.

"When will you let me know?" he said.

"That's better, Krieg; that's more like the old friend I used to know; that's entirely more reasonable. I will let you know within twenty-four hours. That must satisfy you, I am afraid."

"Very well," said the other.

"The Priest" pressed a button on his desk.

"No harm will befall you now." His face was so benevolent that he might have been bestowing a blessing on the man he had just threatened.

CHAPTER FOUR "THE MOLE" LOOKS GRIM

SEATED at his wide desk, Sir Harker Bellamy might have been a graven image, so immovable did he remain.

"This is so serious, my boy, that I scarcely like to think of the consequences," he told Sinclair.

Hugh stared.

"But war, Chief—it seems impossible!"

"Impossible!" the old man scoffed. "Nothing is impossible at the present time. Where are your eyes, my boy? Don't you read the newspapers? Don't you know that the whole of Europe is an armed camp, that every nation is piling up munitions, that a match may set light to the whole bag of tricks—and that the first shot is expected to be fired at any moment? Between ourselves, I have just come from a Cabinet meeting . . ." He did not finish, but started tapping on the desk with his blunt finger-nails.

Sinclair knew this to be a sign of intense mental perturbation. Bellamy was a man of ice; he had rigid self-control, but even he, in times of stress, was forced to have some outlet. Hence this present finger fusillade.

With regard to the taunt that he had just thrown at his head, Hugh might have replied with every confidence that his own work in

London had occupied so much of his time that he had had little leisure to spare for the contemplation of European affairs. But, knowing "The Mole," he kept his own counsel.

"The position in regard to Ronstadt and her attitude to this country needs little elaboration," continued Bellamy. "She is, as you know, our traditional enemy. She has been jealous of us for the past hundred years, and, being jealous, and dreaming of the day when she would hold Great Britain in vassalage, she has been making her preparations. The fact that the country is now under a dictator has merely hastened events. But for these futile politicians"—here the speaker made a gesture of ineffable contempt—"we might have been prepared to meet this really terrible danger. But, whilst my agents in Ronstadt have been continually sending data showing that our enemy is completing the biggest air fleet that the world has ever known, we on this side have allowed things, as usual, to drift, until now we are in a state of complete unpreparedness. Heaven only knows what would happen if we were attacked!

"There is only one bright spot. Whilst our so-called rulers have gone to sleep, the hour has produced the man—even if he has cropped up in a most unexpected quarter. I refer, of course, to young Victor Brand, whose invention I was telling you about half an hour ago. This 'Protector Current,' as he more or less vaguely calls it, will not only revolutionise all future warfare, but seems determined to put 'paid' to Ronstadt's ambition. For what is the good of

a tremendous air armada if its fangs are rendered powerless ?—and that, judging from the secret trials, would appear to be the case now that he has perfected his invention."

Sinclair put in a word.

" Sorry to butt in, Chief, but aren't you being a little too optimistic ? At present, the Protector Current has only been fitted to warships. At least, I believe that was what you said just now."

" You're quite right. But "—and here, with characteristic caution, the speaker looked round as though afraid that even in his own sanctum eavesdroppers might be hidden—" young Brand himself was at the Cabinet meeting this morning. He was asked this very question by the Minister for War : ' Can you guarantee that cities as well as warships may be rendered immune from airship attack ? ' "

" And what did he say, sir ? "

" He said," replied Bellamy slowly, " that, given another three months, he believed he could promise equally satisfactory results."

" But it's marvellous—as you say, it will revolutionise all future warfare."

" Yes, yes, but I am not satisfied, Sinclair ; I am not at all satisfied."

" Why not, sir ? "

" Because, with such a prize at stake, London must be swarming with Ronstadtian agents. It is they we have to watch." Bellamy, restarting his finger fusillade, lapsed into a fit of brooding.

This lasted ten minutes. At the end, he turned again to Sinclair and said, in an entirely different voice :

"Didn't you tell me that you were going down to Portsea to attend the function on H.M.S. *Gallant* to-morrow night?"

"Yes, Chief," replied Sinclair, wondering why his superior had gone off at such a tangent.

"Then listen, my boy. I want you to keep your wits about you."

"Why?"

"Because I think it extremely likely that we may expect a peck of trouble down there. Look at this: it came through from Naysmith, who's at Pé. Raynor decoded it just before you dropped in."

Sinclair, taking the paper from the hand of his superior, read it.

Kuhnreich determined obtain possession Brand invention stop May attack First Lord Admiralty some way stop Warn you be on guard.

"Now, Naysmith is no alarmist," commented Bellamy, "and he would not have sent this unless he had had some very good reason. To-morrow night's affair, as you know, is to serve a double purpose: it is by way of celebrating the commissioning of the latest type of battle cruiser—a sufficiently interesting spectacle for any Ronstadt spy—whilst it is also intended as a kind of peepshow for our illustrious visitor, the Maharajah of Kutani."

"The swine!" broke from his listener.

"What's that?" snapped Bellamy.

In a few words Hugh relieved his overwrought soul of a good deal of its burden.

"What do you think that chocolate-coloured coon——"

"He's not a nigger, he's an Indian," corrected Bellamy.

"It's the same thing—he's coloured, isn't he? Well, he had the damned impertinence to propose to Susan Bertram—and after he had only known her for about ten minutes! Pretty cool, don't you think?"

Bellamy fell back upon an ancient aphorism which Sinclair considered positively moth-eaten in the circumstances.

"The ways of the East are inscrutable," said the Chief of Q.1 ponderously.

"They may be inscrutable, but if he doesn't keep away from Susan I'll knock hell out of his hide—and that's that," concluded the young man passionately.

"Well, don't do anything rash, my boy," advised the older man. "There's sufficient trouble in the world already without you adding to it. Keep your eyes skinned, as I said just now," were his final words at parting.

"Aye, aye, sir," said Sinclair, irrepressible once more, hitching his trousers sailor-fashion.

CHAPTER FIVE — SENSATION AT PORTSEA

It is not often that the British Admiralty can be said to allow their imagination to run riot, but Sir Franklyn Bertram was a red hot revolutionary as regards ideas, and it was his own notion that the completion of His Majesty's cruiser *Gallant* should be signalised at Portsea, the famous naval station, by a reception and dance held on the deck of the latest addition to Britain's maritime strength.

The scene was an extremely brilliant one, for invitations to this novel function had been eagerly sought by the reigning beauties of the season as well as by those who fondly fancied themselves to come in the same category.

"The Priest," cunningly disguised as a member of the suite of H.H. the Maharajah of Kutani, looked round upon the scene and quietly smiled. Only a short distance away he recognised his old enemy, Sir Harker Bellamy. The Chief of Q.I, looking as grim-faced as any admiral who had ever lost an action, was regarding all who passed with a fixed, implacable stare. No doubt he was looking for anyone he might regard as being in the least degree suspicious. "The Priest" had an uncontrollable desire to go up and talk to the man, but forced himself to refrain. He was helped in

this victory of the mind by a message brought to him from his temporary master.

He found the Maharajah brooding alone.

" You have seen the girl ? " he asked.

" Yes—she's the loveliest creature on board."

The other's face became convulsed.

" See that you do not fail me," he warned.

He was answered in the same tone.

" I do not make rash promises."

Then the two parted. " The Priest " felt very much like having a drink, but decided to wait. There would be plenty of time for that. In the meanwhile he had sufficient cause for self-congratulation. His plans had fitted in admirably. He was there that night to kill two birds with one stone—and he did not see why this double triumph should not be his.

Approaching a senior officer, he inquired if it would be possible to be shown over the ship. The suggestion was received with the utmost cordiality.

" Of course. I'll get Lieutenant Graham to take you."

The lieutenant in question proved to be a fresh-coloured youngster who seemed to have his mind more on life in the West End of London than on his profession. " The Priest," always a shrewd reader of human character, was quickly able to come to this conclusion.

He decided to make what capital was possible out of the fact.

Displaying a valuable ruby on the little finger of his left hand—he had borrowed the gem as representing an essential part of his make-up as the secretary to the Maharajah of

Kutani—he said, after twenty minutes or so had passed :

" Do you not find it dull, being on the sea so much ? "

" Dull as hell—I'm sorry ; perhaps I shouldn't have said that. But why not ? " the young officer went on to demand. " I'm completely fed up with the Navy and only wish I saw some chance of getting out of it."

" That is sad news," replied the supposed Indian.

" Yes, it's sad all right, but nothing can be done about it, I'm afraid. You see "—in a sudden burst of youthful confidence—"I'm up to my eyes in debt."

" Oh, that is sadder still. May I ask how much money you owe ? "

" Getting on for four hundred pounds now."

" Four hundred pounds ! But that is a mere—what do you call it ? "

" Bagatelle ? "

" Yes, that is the word—bagatelle. Surely a young man so gifted as yourself should not be at a loss for such a small amount."

" Well, I am. I don't know which way to turn, as a matter of fact. I haven't a father, and I hate asking my pals. Not that any of the crowd on the *Gallant* have any money to spare," he added with a rueful smile.

" What about your bankers ? "

" My bankers ! They'd laugh like the devil if I went in and calmly asked them for an overdraft of four hundred quid. You don't seem to realise how little we fellows are paid in the British Navy."

The richly-attired native of Kutani took the young knight of the doleful countenance to one side.

"My master, the Maharajah, has millions that he will never be able to spend. He is generous beyond the descriptions of poets. If you can arrange to come to London at an early date, Lieutenant Graham, I am satisfied that he would be only too willing to lend you money you require. It would be an honour for him to do so. He is a tremendous admirer of this country and of the gallant men who form the officer class. Now, do you think you could bring yourself to visit him in London."

"Betcha life!" was the ready response. "Where does he hang out?"

"We are staying at present at the Sheridan Hotel."

"Shall I make an appointment?"

"The earlier the better. Who knows? He may even make you an offer to join his own service. Life in Kutani is very good—there is tiger-shooting, pig-sticking——"

"Don't tell me any more," pleaded Lieutenant Graham. "If I imagined for a moment that there was any chance of getting out of this and going to India, I'd start turning handsprings right away."

"I think it can be arranged," was the answer.

In the meantime, Susan Bartram was mourning the loss of her favourite cavalier. Where was Hugh, and why hadn't he turned up?

The last time she had seen him he had promised faithfully that he would be on hand.

"Can't miss it, old dear, even if I wanted to," he said jestingly. "You see, I shall be on duty: I have to guard the heavy guns in case anyone tried to pinch 'em."

She had laughed—that was one of Hugh's chief attractions, she had long since decided, his ability to make her laugh on any and every occasion; but the memory of that short talk did not console her for what she considered to be Sinclair's dereliction of duty.

Even the explanation which Sir Harker Bellamy—that grey-faced taskmaster for whom Hugh worked—gave her was not satisfying.

"I'm most awfully sorry, Miss Bertram," Bellamy had told her, "but I'm afraid I gave your young man a job of work to do to-night. Unavoidable." Then, as though he had said enough, the Intelligence Chief had turned away.

Even without Hugh, it had been a grand night. She had had a marvellous time. As Sinclair had prophesied, she had been the belle of the battleship. The most charming men had besieged her for dances, and there did not seem to be one officer of the *Gallant* who had not tried to put in a spot of flirting. All but one, that was; a boy whose figure reminded her very strongly of Hugh Sinclair. He had kept away from her religiously; perhaps he was a girl-hater. Anyway, he had left her alone. Why, she couldn't decide; but, with so many others pressing their attentions, she had not missed the solitary exception to the rule.

But the ordeal of the evening was approaching.

She had to dance with the Maharajah of Kutani. She had not told her father of the occurrence two nights before—it seemed at the time such an absurd thing to report—and, according to her modern reckoning, the one man to know had been Hugh Sinclair. How Hugh had glared, threatening almost—to use one of his favourite phrases—to go up in smoke! "The mangy hound!" he had finally exploded. "Look here, Sue, if that music-hall turn bothers you again I'll change him into a Riviera sunset."

But the ruler of Kutani did not prove so terrifyingly embarrassing, after all; on the contrary, he was rather nice.

"I am grateful to you, Miss Bertram, for overlooking my very stupid behaviour of the other evening. I realise now it was in the worst possible taste from a Western point of view. You will excuse my rudeness?"

"Oh, of course, Maharajah," she had replied.

After the dance he had taken her back to her father, bowed, and left immediately.

There had been nothing wrong with him that night.

As all good things are bound to come to an end, the function eventually closed down. But it was after two o'clock in the morning that the guests prepared to leave. It had been true Navy hospitality.

It had been arranged that Sir Franklyn

Bertram and his daughter should stay the night at a country mansion belonging to a retired rear-admiral named Hartley. Hortwell Manor was situate only about twelve miles from the port, and, as Hartley said when they got into the big Daimler: "We shall all be home in no time—or even quicker than that."

But, after they had left the town behind them and were speeding through the quiet, dreaming country-side, the chauffeur suddenly pulled up the car.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to his employer, who was seated next to the driver, "but there's something gone wrong. I don't quite know what it is, but I rather fancy it's to do with the ignition."

"Can you see to it, Simpson?"

"Oh, yes, sir—nothing to worry about. I overhauled the engine myself this morning."

Yet, when five minutes had passed and the chauffeur was still puzzled, Hartley got down from his seat and joined him on the road.

No sooner had he done so than a fast racing car pulled up. From it sprang four men; they were all armed with what appeared to be loaded sticks. The chauffeur, taken unawares, was knocked out immediately; Hartley had no chance against the two assailants who sprang at him.

After that the success of the raiding party was ensured, for the only man left was the First Lord of the Admiralty, and although he put up a gallant struggle he was hopelessly outnumbered from the start.

Only five minutes after the racing car had

pulled alongside, it sped off again. But this time it carried, as an extra passenger, Susan Bertram.

In answer to the signal which had been flashed from the shore, a collapsible boat left the side of the grey monster that had risen so startlingly out of the waves, and, once the precious cargo was aboard, it returned quickly to the submarine.

CHAPTER SIX — THE TRAITOR

BELLAMY'S voice on the telephone was relentless.

"Certainly not," he said; "I could not possibly allow it. You are working for me, and must therefore obey my orders."

"But, my God, Chief——"

"That is enough. Carry on as we arranged."

The line went dead.

It was in pursuance of this set plan of campaign that a young, athletic-looking man, dressed in a rather worn suit of navy-blue serge called at the Sheridan Hotel at three o'clock on that same afternoon. His manner was so nervous that the chief hall-porter, by reason of his job a keen physiognomist, made a mental note of the fact.

"Have you an appointment with His Highness?" this functionary inquired.

"I'm here by appointment—I have to see his secretary."

"Oh, yes," with a change of tone. "Will you give me your name, please?"

"My name doesn't matter. If you send up and say that the gentleman who was to call at three o'clock has arrived, it will be sufficient."

"Very good, sir."

The East may be lethargic, but it moved

quickly enough on this occasion; within three minutes the visitor was ushered into one of the rooms comprising the very large suite in which the Maharajah and his staff had been installed. The dark-skinned secretary bowed to the caller.

"You are very prompt, Lieutenant Graham."

The other looked round.

"Not my name, if you please," he said agitatedly. "Don't you realise that I've taken an infernal risk in coming here at all?"

The other waved a hand.

"Risk, my dear Lieutenant! No, there is not any risk. You are here as my friend—and, moreover, you are in mufti. Besides, even at the worst, you have merely come to arrange a loan to help you out of your present difficulties—is that not so?"

Remarking on the excellent English which this suave-tongued pen-pusher possessed—but then he remembered that the secretary of the Maharajah had informed him the night before that he had been educated at Oxford—he sat down and took a cigarette from the box which his host extended to him.

The secretary got immediately to the point.

"I have been talking over our conversation with my master," he stated, "and His Highness, with characteristic generosity, has instructed me to pass on the following suggestion: why should you borrow at all, Lieutenant Graham? If you care to answer a few questions about the matter in which the Maharajah is interested, he will be only too pleased to make you a gift of one thousand pounds."

"A thousand pounds! That's damned handsome. But——"

"Have you not a saying in this country about looking a gift horse in the mouth? I believe so—it seems to come back to me from my Oxford days. I think it is good advice in the present case."

The caller flushed.

"Oh, I don't want you to think that I'm not thoroughly grateful, because I am. At the same time—— Look here," suddenly blazing into anger, "I didn't come here, you know, to be pumped with questions. What is this subject the Maharajah is so keen about? Anything to do with the Navy?"

There was a pause.

"Well, yes, it is," was the reply at length.

"My God! What do you take me for—a bloody traitor? I'm going."

A restraining hand was laid on his sleeve.

"Traitor! But that is a ridiculous idea, my dear Lieutenant. The Maharajah is absolutely loyal to the British Raj. I know that certain sensational newspapers have recently printed a number of contrary statements, but these will form the subject of libel actions in the near future, and so I must not comment upon them now."

"Oh!" The visitor appeared to be revising his first opinion. "I'm sorry if I was too hasty," he said bluntly.

"That's all right; there's no need to apologise. I can quite understand how you must have felt. Please put it down to my clumsiness of tongue—one has to change one's

mental state in dealing with the sophisticated West after the naïve East. The knowledge my master is seeking," continued the secretary, speaking more quickly now, " is a few details concerning this wonderful new invention, brought out, I believe, by a young man named Brand——"

" You mean the Protector Current, as we call it in the Service ? "

" Yes. You see," pressing on, " we in Kutani are living in constant fear of an air attack by Sovrania, which, as you know, is always threatening our frontier. His Highness the Maharajah has a deep and abiding love for his people, and it causes him the most poignant grief whenever he reflects that within the incredibly short space of an hour or so his capital might be razed to the ground by an attack from the air, and thousands of his innocent subjects slain."

" Yes," commented the other thoughtfully, " it would be a bit thick, I agree. But, look here," as though the idea had suddenly come to him, " why doesn't the Maharajah go to the Government ? As he is so loyal to the British Raj, the people up above should be only too pleased to help him out. After all, the inhabitants of Kutani are British subjects, I take it ? "

" Of course they are—although they serve the Maharajah first of all. I am afraid, Lieutenant Graham, that your idea is not practicable."

" Why not ? "

" I will tell you a secret," returned the secretary, lowering his voice. " There is rather a prejudice against my master in the India

Office. A commission which was set up to inquire into the working of his State took back with them from Kutani a most exaggerated and highly-coloured report. Consequently, if I, acting for my master, did apply to the authorities, I feel sure that I should only get snubbed. And that would be shameful. The Maharajah, although so loyal, has a temper that can be likened to quicksilver; he boils over with rage at the slightest thing. The reason of that is that his health has not been very good for the past six months. The native physicians at Kutani are sure that he is suffering from some obscure nervous malady which may"—the speaker looked round—"in time affect his brain. But that is in the strictest confidence."

"I'm sorry," remarked the visitor with true British phlegm. "Well, I don't see that anything can be done about it, then."

"Oh, yes; I am trying to persuade myself that you will prove the good angel to help us out of our difficulty."

The listener became momentarily flippant.

"I don't fancy myself much as an angel," he remarked with a grin. "In any case, I didn't bring my wings here to-day."

The secretary laughed discreetly.

"You joke, Lieutenant Graham, but it is a serious matter. The Maharajah would be prepared to pay almost any price for full details about that invention." He looked at the young man keenly as he spoke.

The caller met his glance before dropping his eyes.

"Any price?" he repeated.

"Any price. I will now come into the open, Lieutenant Graham, because I see that you understand the situation. But, first of all, are you in a position to supply what we require?"

"Yes—I could get the actual plans—if——"

"You mean, if it were worth your while?"

"Look here, I don't like this at all, and I shouldn't stay here talking unless I were so hellishly in the soup. But for ten thousand pounds I'd take the risk. I know where I can get a drawing of the very thing—as I told you just now," he added more lamely.

The secretary pondered.

"Ten thousand pounds! It is a great deal of money."

"Nothing to the Maharajah. You told me last night that he had more millions than he could count. Besides, he's a walking jeweller's shop; one of his rings would keep the ordinary fellow in comfort for the rest of his life. Well, you can take it or leave it." He turned to go.

"You are so hasty—especially for a young man who has got himself into trouble," complained the secretary. "Please do not be so impetuous. I am more than prepared to listen to anything you have to say, but the matter needs discussion. If you will wait here for not more than five minutes, I promise to bring you back the Maharajah's answer."

During the time that the caller was left alone, he paced up and down the room like a man whose conscience was riding him hard. Now and then he muttered, clenching his hands.

Anyone close enough to him would have heard a flood of self-abuse coming from his lips.

He turned quickly as the door opened. It was the secretary, and he was smiling.

"I am pleased to tell you that my master has agreed to your terms," he stated when reaching the centre of the room. "There is only one stipulation, and one only: he says he must have the drawing for at least two days before he pays over the money."

"But that's impossible—absolutely impossible! Do you think I should hang around Portsea, or even London, once I had handed the drawing over? I shouldn't be such a damned fool. I should have to bolt at once directly I'd done the pinching. Why, it would mean fifteen years if I were caught! They sent an Army fellow to quod for five years just for selling a few details about some tanks."

"Yes; I read about the case. It was very sad. But the young man in question was very much of a fool, I am afraid. He did not cover his tracks very well. With you it would be very different. The Maharajah has perfected a plan which would keep you quite safe, away from any inquisitive people, until the money was paid."

"Oh! What is the plan?"

"I will tell you later. In the meantime, I want you to be as reasonable as possible, Lieutenant Graham. Even a man possessing my master's immense wealth cannot be expected to buy a pig in a poke—isn't that the expression? His last words to me as I left him just now were these: 'Tell the young man not to

worry. I'll personally guarantee his safety until I can get the drawings into expert hands to be scrutinised and copied. I'll hide him in a perfectly safe place, where no one would ever think of looking for him."

"Where is this place?"

"I cannot tell you that. You must trust me, even as I am prepared to trust you. How quickly can you get this drawing?"

"It will take me only a few hours."

"Very well; could you be here at midnight to-night?"

"Yes."

"And bring the drawing with you?"

"Yes."

"That will satisfy the Maharajah."

"You realise that I'm taking a terrible risk, don't you?"

"With the plan I have in mind there will be no danger," was the soothing answer.

And with that, the caller appeared to be satisfied.

"All right, I'll be back at midnight," he said.

CHAPTER SEVEN — THE SCRAP OF PAPER

It was frequently said of Sir Harker Bellamy that he could "smell crime," and those who worked with him in the hectic hours following the disappearance of Susan Bertram had full corroboration of the statement.

Bellamy had bitterly reproached himself over the matter, and this in spite of the fact that the First Lord of the Admiralty had pooh-poohed the suggestion that any responsibility rested on "The Mole's" shoulders. Sir Franklyn Bertram, although knocked unconscious by his assailants, quickly recovered and had refused to take the doctor's advice.

"What do you think I am, man?" he had demanded angrily. "A cripple? Until my daughter is found I shall give what help is possible."

So it was that his heavily-bandaged head had been seen in many places round and about Portsea in the early hours of that morning.

The details of the sensational affair had been kept from the press, although, knowing the omniscient qualities of the modern reporter, Bellamy was not hopeful that the affair could remain secret much longer. If there was one bright spot in the whole wretched business, he decided, it was that the occurrence had taken place at an hour when the average person was

abed, whilst the scene of the outrage had been an extremely lonely spot.

He himself had had no sleep, of course; neither had the Chief Constable of Southants, whose head-quarters were in Winchester. Bellamy had quickly decided that this retired Army officer possessed about as much intelligence as the average peewit, and when the Chief Constable had volunteered the statement that, in his opinion, the crime had been engineered by a gang of modern motor bandits, he had had to put such restraint on his feelings that his usually pallid face had become crimson.

Now, seated in a private room at Admiral Hartley's house, he was busy telephoning to London, giving instructions right and left. He was so occupied when the door opened unceremoniously and Hugh Sinclair dashed in. Bellamy held up a hand to enjoin silence, but Sinclair refused to be repressed.

"I must speak to you, Chief," he cried. "Have you got any clue yet? Is there any chance of her being found?"

"Will you shut up!" commanded his superior.

"No—I've got to know something."

Bellamy, with a few crisp final words, concluded the conversation on the telephone and then swung round in his chair.

"What have you to report?" he demanded.

"That can wait. Have you got any clue, Chief? Damn it all, man, can't you see that I'm almost out of my mind with worry?" This was a very different Hugh Sinclair from

the one who went jesting through existence, treating life as a lark. Bellamy's heart softened.

"All right, my boy, I'll tell you what's happened. We were able to trace the progress of the car until it fell over the top of the cliffs at a little place called Wilbarrow, about six miles from here."

Hugh gasped.

"Fell over the cliffs, sir? Then——"

"I don't think there is the slightest need for you to worry. On the contrary, I think we have a valuable clue. Going down on the sands, I managed to find this." He passed over a scrap of paper.

Sinclair turned it over in his hands in a bewildered manner.

"It doesn't convey anything to you, perhaps?" continued "The Mole." "But I happen to know that it is a scrap of the official paper of the Imperial Ronstadtian Navy."

"Ronstadtian Navy?" repeated Sinclair like a man in a maze.

"I think we shall find that Miss Bertram was taken out to sea, and possibly placed on a submarine. At least, that is my impression. The car was purposely driven over the cliffs after the occupants had got out, in the hope that it might be thought a fatal accident had occurred—the tide washes right up to the bottom of the cliffs at that part of the coast."

Sinclair shook his head.

"I don't get it, sir—I can't see the drift of it at all—unless that swine 'The Priest' is working for Ronstadt——"

"He used to work for Ronstadt," replied "The Mole."

"But where does Susan come in? Do they intend to hold her to ransom?"

"It looks like it," was the reply.

"My God! What can I do?" said Hugh, aghast at the possibilities. "That poor kid alone in a foreign submarine. . . . Sir Harker, you must do something."

"I have already done everything possible, my boy. I was telephoning to London when you came in. And now calm yourself for a moment, because I want to hear your own report. Did you go to the Sheridan Hotel?"

Regaining his self-control with an obvious effort, the young man leaned forward in his chair.

"Yes," he said, in a voice that was not quite steady; "I got there at three o'clock as arranged and asked for the secretary fellow —the man I was speaking to last night on board the *Gallant*."

"Did he recognise you as yourself, do you think."

"No. I'm pretty certain he thought I was still Lieutenant Graham, who had got into a hell of a mess through falling into debt and was willing to do almost anything to retrieve himself."

"All right. Now, what happened?"

"Well, to cut a long story short, Chief, what he was after was the Brand Protector Current device."

"Ah! Now let me tell you something in return, my boy: that secretary fellow, as you have called him, was none other than the arch criminal I have described to you as 'The Priest.'"

"'The Priest!' Are you certain sir?"

"Yes; this case carries all his hall-marks."

"But no one would have imagined he wasn't an Indian of high rank."

"I dare say not. He has a genius for disguise. Things are becoming a little clearer now. What was arranged?"

"Well, I piled it on, rather—told him that I was right up against it and that I was prepared to do anything for money."

"He took the bait?"

"Yes—hook, line and sinker. He wanted to know my price for obtaining the complete drawing of the invention. I named ten thousand pounds."

"Did he agree?"

"On condition that the drawing should be in the Maharajah's hands—he pretended that the reason his master wanted the plans was because they in Kutani were afraid of an air invasion from Sovrania. When I suggested that Kutani, being a native State, swearing allegiance to and being under the protection of, the British raj, they should ask the Government's help, he came back with the statement that the Maharajah, owing to a cooked report by a Special Commission that had been sent to Kutani, was not in good odour with the India Office."

"Clever," commented Bellamy. "As a matter of fact, he was perfectly right. In some circumstances there is nothing like telling the truth; it bears the ring of sincerity."

"You would have thought, Chief, that this fellow had spent all his life serving the Maharajah."

"Whereas he was solely intent, unless I'm mistaken, in serving himself and his employers in Ronstadt," returned Bellamy. "Now there is no time to be lost, my boy. I must get into touch with the naval people at Portsea straight away." He stopped, with his hand half-way towards the telephone. "I don't know whether I can ask you to take this appalling risk, Sinclair," he said, with a keen look at the young man.

"'Appalling risk'? I'd do anything to try to get Susan out of those devils' clutches."

"I know you would. And, what is more, you are the only person able to discover where she has been taken. It is my conviction, as I've told you before, that she was placed on board a Ronstadtian submarine standing out from the shore—but we must make sure. Yes, we must make sure. This time there must be no mistake. I want 'The Priest' and his entire gang. The spies of Ronstadt have been causing no end of mischief for months past, and if we can get this man, who is directing their operations—well," with a grim smile, "I will stand myself the best dinner that Scott's can provide. Not that you will be left out, Sinclair; you and Susan Bertram shall be my guests."

"Yes, Chief—but may I remind you that all we're doing at the moment is to TALK?"

"That defect shall be quickly remedied." This time Bellamy's hand did not hesitate, and a moment later he was asking for a telephone number.

CHAPTER EIGHT THE MAHARAJAH IS PEEVED

SUSAN awoke out of what seemed to be a drugged sleep to find a dark-skinned face bending over her.

"My lotus flower!" said a voice she hated instinctively. "There is no need for you to be alarmed."

She sat upright, looking round her with bewildered eyes. What had happened? Memories rushed through her brain like a vivid but disjointed film. First, there was the recollection of the ball on the *Gallant* the night before. Was it the night before? Then the ride in the car—and after that? There had been an accident—a fight. Yes, she could remember now. Some men had come along in a fast racing car and . . . So this was the awakening! A bitter one, for, as she looked into the muddy eyes of the Indian potentate, she knew real fear for the first time in her life. It was this "coloured swine," as Hugh Sinclair had termed him, who had engineered the outrage. Piqued because she had turned him down, he must have sworn revenge—and now he seemed in a fair way to obtain it.

"Tell me where I am," she said.

The Maharajah allowed his eyes to leave her face for a moment whilst he looked through the stifling atmosphere.

"You are on board a submarine," he replied. "I arranged for you to be brought here because life without you, Miss Bertram, is merely an empty longing which I must have satisfied."

"You vile beast!"

The small, podgy hands twitched.

"Be careful how you address me, Miss Bertram, because——" He was not able to complete the threat, for the curtains marking off the small space that formed a little ward-room where she found herself upon returning to consciousness, was thrust open. Looking at them both was a blond giant of a man dressed in oilskins. His huge face and bull-like neck, which gave him something of the appearance of a bison, were thrust forward.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded in strongly-accented English. "You have no right to come to this lady's cabin."

Susan's heart beat quickly. Here, at least, was a man of her own colour, if not of her own race.

"Take him away—and please see that he doesn't come here again."

The blond giant, who she imagined must be the commander of the submarine, gave her a stiff bow.

"Fräulein," he said, "you can depend on me. This dog shall not trouble you further." As he spoke he caught hold of the Maharajah by the shoulder and, with a vigorous push, sent him reeling towards the door. The next moment Susan was alone.

The ruler of Kutani was almost incoherent with rage. Passion swept through him like a tempest. He saw all his carefully-planned projects being wrecked.

"Do you know who I am?" he stammered.

The commander of the submarine waved the words aside.

"It doesn't matter who you are, you coloured dog. What does matter is that I am Karl von Ehrlich—and that I am in command here. How dare you thrust your filthy carcass into the presence of that sweet lady?" Von Ehrlich would have liked to catch the saffron-coloured monstrosity (as he, in his arrogant Aryan way, mentally abused the other) and squeeze the life out of him. Ever since the girl had come aboard he had himself been fighting a fierce passion for her. Although she belonged to the nation which he believed would shortly be at war with his own, he felt that the time could not be long delayed when he would have to declare himself, and for this loathsome Indian to be prowling round. . . . *Donnerwetter!* It was more than a man could stand!

Only a little of his native dignity clung to the Maharajah, but he called upon it now.

"It is time we understood each other," he said; "it was by my orders that this girl was brought on board your submarine last night. Is that correct?"

"In a measure. I view spies like carrion, but I recognise that the breed is sometimes necessary. We have a man working for us in England who is known as 'The Priest.'"

"That is the very man I engaged to kidnap the girl. He was to receive ten thousand pounds—he has already received it."

A burst of gargantuan laughter greeted the remark.

"*Kolossal!*" boomed the commander. "It is the finest joke I have heard for years."

"What do you mean—'joke'?"

"Exactly this: 'The Priest' wanted to kill, as the English say, two birds with one stone. He takes your money and also fulfils his obligations to Ronstadt. It was arranged between us that the daughter of the First Lord of the British Admiralty should be taken prisoner and held to ransom on my submarine. We were to lay down certain conditions before she was released—*hein?* I was against your coming aboard at all, but our agent said it was necessary. But I am beginning to see his point—you, as the Maharajah of a wealthy Indian State, would be worth a pretty penny. Tell me, Your Highness, how much would your counsellors be prepared to pay to have you back safe and sound on shore?"

If a coloured man can be said to turn green, the Maharajah performed that astonishing feat the next second.

"You will be punished for this," he hissed. "You want the girl for yourself—but I warn you, she is not for you—all her loveliness must be saved for me."

With a shout of rage that an angry bull might have emitted, the commander rushed forward. With one blow of his fist he knocked the other senseless. Then, ringing a bell:

"Carry this offal away and take him ashore," he ordered the sailors.

Susan looked up as the giant returned.

"Thank you," she said simply. "I was almost at my wits' end to know what to do when you came in just now."

He gave her another of his stiff bows.

"Fräulein Bertram," he started.

"You know my name?"

He nodded.

"Tell me where I am—is this really a submarine?"

"Yes, Fräulein, it is Submarine Z51 of the Imperial Ronstadtian Navy. I am the commander—Karl von Ehrlich."

Although she knew the answer, she had to feign ignorance.

"But why am I here?"

"That, Fräulein, is a long story. But I have come to tell you that you need have no fear—that dirty brute will not be able to molest you further. I have sent him ashore."

"Won't you send me ashore, too? My father will be so anxious."

"Your father, Fräulein, will be communicated with at the earliest possible moment. And now, please, I assure you, you have nothing to fear." Taking her limp hand, he raised it to his lips. Then the door curtains dropped behind him again, leaving the girl, who felt sick with a different kind of terror, alone with her thoughts.

CHAPTER NINE — INTO THE TRAP

THE accusing voice cut the air like a sword.

"I regret to tell you, Maharajah, that you have acted very much like a fool," said "The Priest." "Why couldn't you wait? The girl would have kept. To go rushing things like that was to ask for trouble. One moment," he went on as the ruler of Kutani seemed about to break in. "My instructions to Commander von Ehrlich were to take you and the girl across to the French coast. Once you were landed there, you could have done what you liked; any question of pursuit would have been ruled out. You could have hired an aeroplane directly you got to Le Bourget. But now, of course——" Shoulders were shrugged with an eloquence that no words could have matched.

The Maharajah was furious.

"You have betrayed me," he stated. Though he had been "gone over" by three valets after arriving at the Sheridan Hotel early that morning, his physical appearance still left considerable room for improvement. His upper lip had been split and a businesslike fist had done considerable damage to his left eye. But the greatest blow of all was the grievous damage to his pride. It was that which made him so venomous now.

"The Priest," secure in his Highgate stronghold, dismissed the charge contemptuously.

"I deny that," he said. "I kidnapped the girl as I had promised. I got her put on a submarine—which was about the most effective hiding-place that human ingenuity could devise. And then, when you with your ridiculous impetuosity spoil all my plans, you have the audacity to come here and tell me that I have betrayed you. We don't do business like that in the West, Maharajah, whatever customs you follow in your own country. Here, a man's word is his bond. Yes, even the word of a crook like myself. And please understand," he said, rising, "that I do not intend to tolerate any further criticism of that kind. I think perhaps you had better go."

The counter-attack left the Maharajah staggered. He had not expected this employee to turn on him in such a manner. Moreover, he was not able to forget that he was out of pocket by a very considerable sum.

"Whatever instructions you gave to the commander of the submarine—that ugly brute—he disobeyed. That is the main point. He had no right to attack me in the manner he did—and before he is much older he will bitterly regret the insult that I had to suffer. In any case, I now wash my hands of the whole affair."

"Love suffers a reverse—is that the situation, Maharajah?" inquired "The Priest."

"You make a jest of it!"

"I am not doing anything of the kind; it's part of my philosophy to view misfortune in

as calm a manner as possible. I have found from experience that the shock to the nervous system is much less if this practice is followed out."

The Maharajah forced his way out of the philosophic mists and showed clearly what was in his mind.

"I want that cheque returned," he said, a note of finality in his voice.

There was silence for a few seconds. Then "The Priest" laid down the cigar he had been smoking.

"Would you mind repeating that?" he said politely.

"I want that cheque returned."

"Thanks. I wished to make quite sure, because I rather fancied I must be labouring under a misapprehension. It gives me considerable pain, Maharajah, to have to inform you that your wish cannot be gratified. You see," he went on quickly, "the cheque was presented at your bank and payment made. I must confess to considerable surprise that you should have uttered this request. You evidently have a good deal to learn about Western commercial methods."

The Maharajah ground his teeth. If this were only Kutani . . . he would have this insolent dog hamstrung, or given over to the one thousand-and-one tortures. As it was, the offensive bearing of the other, and the knowledge that, if he provoked this criminal too far, he might not be allowed to leave that place alive, forced back the words that almost choked him, so fiercely did they demand utterance.

"I have paid you ten thousand pounds—and received nothing in return."

"I can't agree with you, Maharajah. Once again, your reasoning is faulty. You engaged me for the sum of ten thousand pounds to secure possession of a certain girl. I did so. I arranged that a safe passage should be given to both of you to get to a foreign country. That the plan miscarried was entirely your own fault. I have nothing more to say."

The native cunning of the Indian now came to the surface. Not only his voice but his entire manner changed. Even his body seemed to cringe.

"I am sorry," he apologised. "I am so used to having my own way that perhaps I have been unreasonable. You are welcome to the money—as you say, you have earned it. But you can understand, perhaps, my disappointment? Cannot you suggest any means by which I can secure possession of the girl again? Cannot you send a wireless message to your friend the commander? You may tell him, if you like, that I am sorry for the occurrence."

"The Priest" smiled.

"Now that's very handsome of you, Maharajah," he returned. "Of course, I'll do everything possible. Naturally you are disappointed. I should have been disappointed myself if the positions had been reversed. Come into the wireless-room."

When the two were in that small chamber devoted to the sending out and reception of secret messages, "The Priest," with a smile,

handed over a sheet of paper on which he had written a few words.

"This is what I suggest I should send to Von Ehrlich," he stated.

The Maharajah read:

Regret misunderstanding. Maharajah sends his apologies and will return to submarine with me to-night. Another message later.

"Do you think that will do?" inquired "The Priest."

"Admirably," was the suave answer. These two might have been the best of friends.

"Good! Then I'll get it sent off at once—in fact, I'll send it myself."

His face remained immovable whilst he tapped out the message. "The Priest" was a good actor, for this was the communication that actually winged its way to the waiting submarine in the English Channel:

Congratulations getting rid of that coloured fool. Arriving two a.m. Send boat Wilbarrow. Shall have plan.

It was signed with the initial "P."

He turned to his visitor.

"You can now go back to your hotel, Maharajah, and I will ring you up directly I have further news. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly," was the reply. But the Indian did not meet the other's eye as he spoke.

The history of his line was rich in stories of thuggery, bloodshed and brutal assassination.

His father had climbed to the throne over a pile of corpses.

The Maharajah of Kutani had his own ideas on the present situation—and he was keeping them to himself.

It wanted five minutes to midnight when the supposed Lieutenant Graham reported again at the Sheridan Hotel. Word had evidently been left that he was not to be delayed in any way, for, directly he mentioned his name, a porter guided him to a lift, which shot swiftly up to the huge suite on the second floor. The secretary of the Maharajah greeted the visitor with a beaming smile.

"You are most welcome, Lieutenant Graham."

"Not that name!"

"Oh, I'm sorry; I forgot. But, as I assured you before, there is not the slightest risk. Who would associate you, I submit, with the Lieutenant Graham of H.M.S. *Gallant*?"

There was a craftiness to the words that pulled Sinclair up short. Ever since it had happened he could not dissociate this man from the murderous attack that had been made on him in Covent Garden, and now there seemed an innuendo in his last statement that raised all kinds of questions.

But it was too late to draw back now.

"I've brought the plan," he said, pulling out a foolscap envelope from his pocket.

"Did you have much difficulty?"

"I did—and I took an appalling risk."

"Never mind," reassured the dark-skinned tempter. "I shall keep to my promise of stowing you away—isn't that the phrase?—in a perfectly safe place until I have had these blueprints guaranteed as being authentic. Now we will not waste any time, for every minute is precious. Are you ready to undertake a journey?"

"Where are we going?"

"You must leave that to me."

"All right." The speaker shrugged his shoulders as though accepting the inevitable. "But I'm relying on you to play the game, mind," he added a moment later.

"I give you my word of honour," was the answer.

Within five minutes the two of them had entered a closed car that was waiting in a cul-de-sac to the right of the hotel. This, directly they were inside, was driven off at a rapid rate.

It was impossible for Sinclair to decide in which direction they were going, for both windows had thick curtains drawn across them, whilst the chauffeur himself was hidden by the same means. Although he had so much to think about, his companion did not allow him much time to himself. Indeed, the volubility of the supposed secretary to H.H. the Maharajah of Kutani would have been remarkable in any circumstances. During the long drive that ensued, Sinclair was given by the other ample confirmation of the man's character as described to him by Sir Harker Bellamy. "The Priest" possessed a brain in which was stored

all kinds of knowledge. The statement he had made to the effect that his early years had been spent at Oxford could be accepted without question.

Over an hour had passed, and the car was still going at a terrific clip.

Finally the engine slowed down—and then stopped.

"Here we are," came the announcement. Sinclair drew in his breath with a silent ecstasy. If nothing had gone wrong with the plans, this very precious swine would be safe in clink within an hour.

"Out with you—we haven't much time," said the other.

Because he wanted to keep an eye on the man, Hugh, after opening the door, stepped out of the car backwards—and as he did so, a crashing blow descended on his skull, blotting out everything in a swift rush of darkness.

CHAPTER TEN THE DEVIL AND THE DEEP SEA

SUSAN told herself she must keep her courage high; if she didn't, disaster would overtake her. One enemy had been got rid of—confirmation of the Maharajah having been sent ashore had been received by her—but a perhaps greater difficulty remained. This blond giant of a submarine commander had either fallen desperately in love with her—or . . . But she must not think of that.

How close and hot it was in this tiny space! What a life—to be penned under water like this for hours at a time! She felt weak with the continuous effort to draw sufficient fresh air into her lungs.

There was a tap on the door.

"I am to take you to the Commander," said the seaman.

The look which Commander von Ehrlich gave her, as she stood before the small desk at which he had been seated a moment earlier, was not reassuring. The pale blue eyes, so fierce in their scrutiny, seemed able to read every secret in her heart. And something more: they were ablaze with an avid desire that frightened her. She could not forget that this man had the power of life and death over her future.

It was as though he understood her thoughts.

"You need have no fear, Fräulein Bertram. I am your friend and not your enemy. It is true that quite shortly war may possibly break out between our two countries—but that is why I wish to take you away to a place of safety."

"That is nonsense," she told him curtly. "You are a man of honour and you realise I have been brought here by a trick. You realise also that my father, who is——"

He interrupted her.

"The First Lord of the British Admiralty. I am honoured to meet his daughter." The words had an ironical edge to them which gave her fresh cause for alarm.

"Isn't there a chivalry among seamen?" she inquired.

"Certainly, Fräulein."

"Then, Commander, may I ask you to give a proof of it? I want you to put me ashore. My father will be almost mad with anxiety."

The broad shoulders were shrugged.

"Alas, Fräulein, that is not possible. Have I not already told you that war is imminent between our two countries?"

"What has that got to do with it? Besides—forgive me—but I don't believe it. If war between Ronstadt and Great Britain were possible, my father would have told me something about it. I am in his confidence."

"But not to the extent of sharing state secrets, I think. However, there is no time for a discussion of such unimportance now. I have already told you I am your friend; that is why

I must insist upon your remaining in my submarine until all danger is past."

"What danger?"

He spoke very solemnly.

"So long as my submarine is in the English Channel there is a grave risk of our being blown to pieces at any moment."

"Nonsense!" And yet, as she thought about it, there certainly seemed some substratum of truth in what the man said. The important naval port of Portsea must be heavily mined.

"Are we still outside Portsea?" she asked.

He smiled at her.

"I have more sense than that, Fräulein. No, but we are still in the English Channel. I have to remain here until I receive further orders." He was not going to tell her any more. How futile words were in certain circumstances! He wanted to crush this lovely English flower in his arms—and only the superficiality of good manners that represented the veneer of the brute-man prevented him from putting this desire into effect.

"So you refuse to do the decent thing?"

"Alas, Fräulein, my hands are tied. . . . Enter!" he called loudly, as a knock sounded on the door.

At the sight of the man who stood on the threshold, Von Ehrlich turned to the girl.

"I am afraid you must return," he said; "but no harm will come to you. Remember what I have said."

"I think you're a cad," was the answer as she walked to the door.

"Well?" the Commander snapped at his first officer.

"A certain party has arrived," was the reply, "and he seems to be rather pleased with himself."

"Has he come alone?"

"No," was the smiling response—"but here he is."

"The Priest," entering that small cabin, still dressed in his Indian costume, flung Von Ehrlich a questioning glance. A keen reader of human character, he realised that the wireless waves that their personalities sent out were likely to cause a clash at any moment. But he had done his part—had done more than his part—and this fellow would have to treat him with respect.

"Good evening, Commander."

"Good evening," was the curt reply—"or should it be good morning?"

"The Priest" evaded the issue, concentrating on the essential facts.

"You got my wireless message?"

The other nodded.

"But I warn you that I will not have that dirty Indian on board my submarine. Have you seen him?"

"Yes; he came to my place at Highgate. How's the girl?"

The blue eyes blazed.

"Fräulein Bertram is very well."

"That's good. Well, I've brought her company—the young man she is in love with——"

"What's that you say?" Herr von Ehrlich had jumped to his feet, his fists clenched.

"The Priest," who derived a malicious sense of pleasure from the sight, used his most suave tone.

"Haven't I told you that Miss Bertram was engaged to a young man working in the British Intelligence? How remiss of me! You see, Commander, beautiful girls in England are so scarce that they are much sought after——"

With a fist like a ham, the submarine commander waved the rest of the words aside.

"You say that this young man is on board?"

"Yes," and with admirable succinctness the visitor narrated the set of circumstances leading up to the present time.

"Herr Krieg will be very pleased when he hears the result of to-night's work," concluded "The Priest." "I rather fancy I have done pretty well."

Although Karl von Ehrlich had no use for spies—he loathed traitors of all kinds—yet he had to find some expression of admiration for the other. After all, this man, criminal though he might be, was working for the future might and majesty of the Ronstadtian Republic.

"Yes," he said, "you have done very well indeed—a good bag. The man Bellamy is also here, I understand."

"Yes—and in the worst temper I have ever witnessed. You see, Commander, it was quite simple—Sir Harker Bellamy was so intent on setting a trap for me that he didn't realise I was holding most of the aces. It was arranged between him and Sinclair that a cooked plan of the Brand Protector should be foisted on me for the sum of ten thousand pounds. I knew

my car would be followed from London, and made arrangements accordingly. Those arrangements ensured that, directly Sinclair stepped from the car, he should be knocked senseless. Before that, however, the body of men which Bellamy had taken to Portsea had been looked after by a still greater number working under my instructions. . . . It would almost seem," the speaker continued, " that my old antagonist rather under-estimated me this time. Now, he is learning his lesson. Oh, by the way, Commander, I ordered them both to be put in irons immediately we came on board. I take it you have no objection ? "

" You should have asked for my permission first."

" But, my dear Von Ehrlich, you don't seem to realise that this gentleman, Sir Harker Bellamy, is practically the head of the British Intelligence. If he managed to escape—a contingency which, I agree, is not very possible, the consequences would be most serious."

" I will see them for myself," said the Commander, and pushed his way past.

CHAPTER ELEVEN — A VISIT TO SCOTLAND YARD

THE Maharajah of Kutani struck the servant across the face.

"Do you mean he's gone?" he cried.

The man stood his ground.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"How long has he been gone?"

"For about half an hour, Your Highness."

As further inquiries proved this statement to be true, the Indian ruler nearly exploded in a paroxysm of rage. Used to having his slightest wish instantly fulfilled, his merest whim immediately gratified, the series of indignities to which he had been recently subjected threatened him for a short time with actual insanity. He had been tricked, deceived and humiliated; but he would have his revenge—there was yet time.

Big Crime was paying handsome dividends these days, and so it happened that Sir Harold Lellant, Assistant-Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, was still examining papers beneath the green-shaded desk-lamp when, at twenty minutes to one o'clock in the morning, Inspector Durrant entered the room and tried to attract attention by a meaning cough.

"Well, Durrant, what is it?"

"There's a rajah or something wants to see you."

Lellant pushed the papers dealing with the recent £50,000 Pall Mall forgery case on one side and stared hard at the speaker.

"Have you been——?"

"No, sir, I haven't," was the injured reply.

"Well, what do you mean by 'a rajah or something'?"

"All I can say, sir, is that he's coloured, got a lot of jewellery on, and says he's a Rajah of Cutie or something like that."

"Sounds like a bad musical comedy," commented his superior. "What's he got to tell you?"

"That's just it; he won't tell me anything. Says he's got to see the 'Big Number One Man'—which, I take it, is you."

In spite of himself, Lellant laughed.

"I've been called many things," he returned, "but never that. However, tell him I can spare him ten minutes, and no longer. Just that."

"Just that. All right, sir."

It had not occurred to Lellant for a single moment that his late visitor could possibly be the foreign potentate whose visit to London had been splashed on so many newspaper front pages during the past month. For one thing, his mind had been concentrated on an extremely difficult problem at the moment of Durrant's entry, and his tired brain—he had already been working for fourteen hours that day—refused at first to take in any more clear-cut impressions. But, directly Durrant returned

with the caller, his manner changed. This was an important personage and he must treat him with respect.

"Thank you, Durrant." And then, to the other: "I did not realise it was you, Your Highness, who wished to see me."

The visitor, without reply, seated himself in the easy chair and began to drum his knuckles on the mahogany desk before him. For a full minute this fusillade continued, and then a voice betraying both anger and nervousness asked:

"May I smoke?"

"But, certainly, Your Highness." The Assistant-Commissioner pushed over a box of cigarettes and struck a match in readiness. It was not until he had blown from his unsatisfactory lips four great mouthfuls of smoke that the caller came to business."

"I am here to tell you of a very evil conspiracy," he commenced. "It concerns the kidnapping of the daughter of the First Lord of the Admiralty."

Lellant sat bolt upright. For the last twenty-four hours he had been worried almost out of his mind by this very happening, although the chief responsibility had been undertaken by the Secret Service, and it was partly to give his mind a rest that he had turned his attention half an hour before to the Pall Mall forgery case. His voice was sharp as he answered:

"What do you know about the kidnapping of Miss Bertram, Your Highness?"

The reply was disconcerting.

"I was responsible for it."

"You!"

"I realise, Sir Harold, the effect that statement may have on you. Nevertheless, it is true. I have come here to-night partly to confess to a great piece of foolishness and partly to give you information which will enable you to capture the greatest enemy England has at the present time."

"Wait a minute." The Assistant-Commissioner was now the man of action. "I must get a shorthand-writer in," he said.

The other put up a lemon-coloured hand.

"But I intended that no one but you should hear," he said.

"That's all nonsense," was the brusque retort. "I must have a record of this conversation." And he pressed the bell on his desk again.

Twenty minutes later, when the saffron-coloured countenance of the visitor had turned to a dullish green through the intense and fierce scrutiny of the Assistant-Commissioner, Lellant dismissed the stenographer.

"Get that typed as quickly as possible," he said. "And now, Your Highness, let me tell you that you have behaved like a damned fool." Sir Harold Lellant had no respect for rank when rank had disgraced itself.

"I realise that. If I hadn't realised it, should I have come here to-night?"

The other made an inarticulate sound which might have signified anything—including contempt.

"You have behaved in a manner which would have disgraced a savage," went on the relentless voice.

"I merely intended to give Miss Bertram a fright. It was just a joke—a bad-tempered one, I agree—but still a joke."

Lellant glowered. If he had followed his personal inclination he would have thrown the man out of his room and down the stairs. But this thing went deep; he had to be careful—to stay his hand. Great issues were involved. Part of the story the Maharajah had told him was undoubtedly true—Susan Bertram had been kidnapped; but the more highly-coloured portion—that dealing with supposed spies and the taking of the girl on board a foreign submarine . . . Well, it didn't ring right to him. Perhaps the narrator had concocted it in an attempt to save his face.

Suddenly, shattering the silence, the telephone on his desk rang.

"Excuse me." Picking up the receiver, he listened intently, and, as he listened, his face underwent a change.

Then the story was true!

"All right, Stammers; I'll be ready in ten minutes," he snapped back, and replaced the receiver.

On his feet, he looked down at the Maharajah.

"I have to go to Portsea immediately with an important member of the British Admiralty," he stated, "and you are to come with me."

The visitor twiddled his fingers.

"But I don't want to come—I want to stay in London."

"I don't care a damn what you want to do: you're coming with me," was the irrevocable comment. "And wrap up warm," Lellant added grimly, "because you're likely to get cold feet."

CHAPTER TWELVE — THE BRONZE STAR

"THE PRIEST" surveyed his two prisoners with an avid pleasure.

"You're getting old, Bellamy," he said to the grim-faced British Secret Service Chief; "old and incompetent. A moment's thought should have told you that a more clever scheme was necessary to trap a person with my mentality. I guessed from the beginning that the supposed 'Lieutenant Graham' was none other than this young man, one of the latest recruits to your Department. It was because I wished to singe his wings that I arranged the attack in Covent Garden the other night. That failed—and those responsible have been punished; but I think I can claim to have given myself complete satisfaction." He paused to blow cigarette smoke from his lips in a gesture of personal satisfaction before resuming: "I knew from the moment I looked at them that the supposed plans of the Brand Protector were phoney; as a matter of fact, I had arranged for the originals to be stolen from the British Admiralty—and these are now in my possession."

"Liar!" declared Sir Harker Bellamy.

For a moment Sir Hugh Sinclair was afraid that their tormentor would strike the speaker in the face, and, manacled as he was, he intended to risk everything if this

happened. But "The Priest" had merely smiled.

"Have it your own way, Bellamy. Perhaps, when the commander of this submarine shows them himself, you will be convinced." He puffed at his cigarette with evident relish. "Things would appear to be going well with me," he stated. "I have three very important hostages on board—Miss Bertram and your two selves. It is a pity her father isn't with us, for then the party would be complete."

"You swine!" stormed Sinclair.

"My dear 'Lieutenant Graham,' such bad manners are sadly out of place on board a Ronstadtian submarine, let me remind you. And, by the way, Bellamy, I have no doubt that the people who employ me would be very interested to have details about a number of matters of which I have made a note," pulling a piece of paper from his breast pocket. "Of course, should you decide to maintain your present masterly silence, there are ways and means which can be used. Torture has, unfortunately, rather gone out of fashion nowadays, but I have a mediæval mind. . . . I will leave you to that reflection."

"You sent for me?" The tone was insolent, and Commander Karl von Ehrlich determined on stern measures.

"You seem to forget that I am the commander of this craft," he stated. "Yes, I did send for you, and now I want you to listen intently

to what I am going to say. I have decided that all three prisoners shall be taken ashore."

The man who had been called to the cabin laughed.

"How amusing—how very amusing, my dear Commander!" he returned. "But I am afraid I cannot agree to the proposition."

"You—who are you to decide what is or is not to be done? Have I not told you I am the Commander here?"

"You have—until, if I may say so, the repetition is becoming somewhat monotonous. You appear to forget one or two elementary factors, however. One of the prisoners whom I have been successful in handing over to you is a very important member of the British Secret Service. With war so imminent between your country and Great Britain, surely it should penetrate even into such a thick skull as you appear to possess that this man may have, locked away in his brain, much information which would be useful to Ronstadt."

"I am not a barbarian. What do you propose that I should do with this man Bellamy?"

"I propose that you should put him to the question—as the mediævalists used to say."

The blond giant leaned forward in his chair.

"Torture him?"

"Certainly," was the reply. "Why not?"

The other rose, his anger making him a terrifically impoeing figure.

"Be careful," he roared, "or I will have you——"

"Don't say it—I warn you, Commander, don't say it," was the unexpected response.

"I dare say you have seen one of these things before, although I believe they are very scarce." "The Priest" took from a pocket a small bronze star. "You fool! You damned fool!" he sneered, and flung it on the desk before the Commander's eyes.

Karl von Ehrlich started back. Yes, he knew very well what this small bronze star signified. It meant that the possessor owned rights from Kuhnreich himself, the Dictator of Ronstadt—rights that no loyal patriot could dispute. It meant that its owner could command what he willed—if he didn't get his orders obeyed, so much the worse for the person who thwarted him. This was the most dramatic moment in the submarine commander's life, and his huge body shook with the nervous strain to which it was being subjected.

When he spoke his voice trembled.

"I had no idea——" he started.

"Well, you know now," was the blunt reply. "Do what I order, or Kuhnreich shall have a personal report from me about your criminal negligence. Already I have spoken to Krieg."

The blond giant swayed on his feet like a man stricken.

The car was a supercharged Mercury, and it raced along at a speed which left at least one of its occupants gasping. The Maharajah of Kutani expected every moment to be hurtled into eternity; had the driver gone stark, raving mad?

The other two men sitting opposite paid him no attention : their minds were fully occupied with far more important matters. Stammers, of the Admiralty, had already informed Lellant of what had been done. To begin with, an imperative message had been telegraphed to Kuhnreich, the Dictator of Ronstadt :

Commander of your Submarine Z51 has committed gross international outrage by kidnapping daughter of Sir Franklyn Bertram, First Lord of the British Admiralty, and holding her prisoner on board stop Must insist upon you giving immediate instructions for Miss Bertram's release stop Failing that the consequences will be serious.

" Whether it will have any effect on that megalomaniac Kuhnreich, especially now that the plans of the Brand Protector have been stolen, is entirely problematical," Stammers had continued.

" When I had your phone message I could scarcely believe it possible—how were the plans taken ? " asked Lellant.

" We have yet to find that out," was the grim reply. " But, unfortunately, there's no doubt about it. But this damned submarine commander will find himself up against something very shortly—that is, unless, of course, he has got clean away."

After hearing a few further sentences, Lellant nodded ; but his face remained grave.

" I can't understand why you have not heard

from Bellamy. He was in charge of the job, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"I know Bellamy," continued the Assistant-Commissioner. "He's scarcely the type to fall down on a thing of this kind."

"Not unless——" started the other.

"Unless what?"

"Unless he's joined Miss Bertram on board the Z51."

Lellant looked back at the long stream of cars following, and thanked Heaven that they were packed with picked men. This seemed likely to be the most serious case he had ever handled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN — THE TEST

KUHNREICH, the Dictator of Ronstadt, paced up and down his huge study like an animal in a cage. He was faced with a decision which he knew was the most momentous that any living man had ever had to make. He had worked for this moment—had conspired, sent men to their deaths, prayed and dreamed of it—but now that the situation had arisen, he was irresolute. He had the whole of Ronstadt solidly at the back of him ; whatever he decided would receive the unquestioning support of the entire nation. For years the country, under his flaming influence, had thought of nothing but war—war with the traditional enemy, England —and when the newspaper placards carried the announcement, something like eighty millions of people would parade the streets of towns and the lanes of villages, so uplifted in spirit that he might have been their saviour instead of their destroyer.

He knew all this—he knew, too, that, were the present circumstances disclosed to his intimates—they would expect only one thing of him—to send back a taunt to the challenge which lay on his table.

The stage indeed was set, the curtain had gone up, and the leading actor had answered his cue. If the verdict of the world's millions

had been taken at that moment, an overwhelming majority would have been found to prophesy that Kuhnreich would not have hesitated even momentarily.

But the Dictator of Ronstadt *was* hesitating, and the cause, it is certain, is likely to be overlooked by future historians. The day before, whilst driving through the streets of the capital on his way to review the Ronstadtian State Police, he had caught a chill. The cold wind had penetrated into that seat of all earthly contentment or woe, the liver, with the result that twenty-four hours later Kuhnreich was a very sick man—or imagined himself to be such. At any rate, his mind, usually so buoyant, so melodramatically confident of his own destiny as well as that of his country, was now smitten with a malaise. His queasy interior sent its foreboding quivers to the brain -- and Kuhnreich, under the bane of this stomachic spell, became a changed individual.

Even when his secretary brought in a decoded message which ran :

Plans of the Brand Protector Current secured by Priest,

and bore the signature " Krieg," he could not cast off his misgivings. The hour of destiny might have struck, but Kuhnreich was not the man to greet it.

After ten more minutes of feverish pacing up and down his spacious study, he gave the

following to be telegraphed immediately to the British Government :

I am in entire ignorance of the occurrence reported.—Kuhnreich.

" Don't talk," warned Bellamy, gesturing with his manacled hands towards the two jailers who were playing a noisy game of cards only a few yards away.

Sinclair nodded. The Chief of Q1 probably did not realise it, but that nod represented a greater sacrifice on the part of the younger man than anything which had happened before in his life. " Don't talk "—when the entire world had crashed about his feet ; when all his hopes and ambitions had crumbled to dust ; when—and this was the part which was threatening him with actual madness—Susan was in another part of that infernal submarine, suffering—what ?

He groaned.

Sir Harker Bellamy turned to him with a look of commiseration. This grim-faced man, who was supposed to have a heart of steel, realised what the youngster was suffering, and reproached himself bitterly for being the indirect cause. Everything had seemed smooth sailing ; he had not imagined for a moment that " The Priest " would have been suspicious. Had he done so, he would have gathered a much greater body of men and thus avoided the catastrophe that had happened.

Now there was no use blinking facts ; both Sinclair and he were in the gravest possible

danger. No doubt this submarine was even now proceeding rapidly in the direction of Ronstadt. Once they were landed in that country, neither would be seen again. The methods of the Dark Ages prevailed under Kuhnreich, and, with war threatening to break out at any moment between the two countries, neither would be shown any consideration. In all probability Sinclair would be killed out of hand, whilst he would be kept a prisoner. The most relentless enemy he had ever made—"The Priest"—would accompany them to Ronstadt, and, if Kuhnreich required any evil prompting—as did not seem likely—he would supply it. It was not likely that either of these men would overlook the fact that he had in his brain a great deal of valuable information which——

The door opened and the jailers sprang to their feet like automata.

It was "The Priest" who led the way. His lips smiled but his eyes were cold and implacable.

"I am sorry to trouble you, Bellamy, but there are a few questions I find it necessary to ask." Already he had a sheet of paper in his hand. "The Ronstadtian Government, of which the Commander here is a responsible official, are desirous of calling upon you to supply certain information."

He waited as if expecting a reply, but the British Secret Service chief remained silent.

"Have you nothing to say?"

"Not to you." Bellamy looked at the speaker's companion.

"Commander von Ehrlich, as an officer of the Ronstadtian Navy, I ask for a guarantee that neither Mr. Sinclair nor I will be troubled further by this man."

"Afraid?" sneered "The Priest."

Bellamy still ignored him.

"I am waiting for your reply, Commander."

There was no answer. The blond giant looked supremely uncomfortable, but he merely shook his head.

Finally:

"This gentleman is in charge," he said haltingly.

"And you take your orders from me—don't you, Commander?"

The other, pale to the lips, lowered his close-clipped head.

"So now you understand the exact position," resumed "The Priest," directing his attention once again to the chief prisoner. "I don't suppose you will talk except under pressure—but I am ready to apply that pressure. There are the necessary means available, as we will show you. True, we do not have the easy facilities the Spanish Inquisition afforded Torquemada, but we possess very good substitutes."

"Bring them to the bow torpedo compartment," he now ordered.

With "The Priest" leading the way, and followed by the Commander, the two men were hustled along by their guard to the for'ard part of the vessel where, secure in their racks, could be seen the torpedoes for the submerged tubes. Dimly lit as the place was, Bellamy and

Sinclair were able to discern the chain blocks and tackle for hoisting the torpedoes into the firing tubes, and the various impedimenta for discharging them. What was the object of bringing them there ? They were soon to learn.

Turning to Von Ehrlich, " The Priest " shouted :

" Have that damned seaman you told me had the audacity to disobey your orders this morning fetched. We will make an example of him and use him at the same time as an illustration."

The Commander spoke in a whisper to one of the guard, who turned aft through the compartment door, returning in a few moments with another man dressed in the uniform of a seaman of the Royal Ronstadt Navy.

Facing the latter, " The Priest " scowled.

Then, with a swift turn, he gave an order :

" String him up."

Before the seaman had time to realise what was happening, he was seized and thrown on his back, his arms being forced above his head. Prising his fingers open, the guards clamped them with one of the iron bands used for holding together the torpedo-hoisting slings. On to this was bent a wire strop, the end being thrown over the hook of a Weston purchase. Slowly the man was hoisted to his feet ; another heave raised him clear of the deck, leaving him suspended with the weight of his body to be taken by his fingers alone.

The sweat poured off his face in his agony, but it was only when he fainted that his cries for mercy were stifled.

" Cast him loose and throw some water over him," cried " The Priest." " This is merely the beginning," he flung at the watching Englishmen.

With fresh horror, the latter now watched the wretch strapped by his hands to one of the standards supporting the deck overhead, and then by his feet to the movable bar which ran the torpedo into the submerged tube.

Fresh cries of agony broke from the prisoner. These told only too well that he realised what his fiendish jailers now intended to do with him.

Slowly " The Priest " opened the control valve from the air supply, and just as slowly the torpedo tube bar started on its outward journey, gradually forcing the prisoner to a horizontal position with his body at stretching point.

With a sardonic smile " The Priest " commenced to explain the meaning of this fresh torture.

" I have one more little exhibit to show you," he stated, " before the display ends, and though we have not an electric chair as used in the United States, we have a very good substitute. The copper helmet of the apparatus used for escape from a sunken submarine makes a splendid cap, and the bare feet on the floor, fastened to the end of the negative wire of a flexible lead, with the positive to the helmet, when plugged in here " (suiting the action to the word), " should give a nice little dancing lesson, electrically taught. It will not kill, but it certainly invigorates ! Watch ! "

With the words, he pushed over the switch supplying the current from the batteries, and the unfortunate victim began hopping all over the deck.

But the end was in sight.

Von Ehrlich could stand it no longer, and, with a howl of anger, he pushed the smirking "Priest" on one side and switched off the current.

"My friend the Commander is too sensitive," declared the unruffled "Priest," "but I can promise that, unless you come through with the information I require, Bellamy, what you have just seen will be a mere curtain-raiser. Don't forget that, as a last resource, we can blow you both out of these torpedo-tubes."

Up to this point no one had given any notice to the younger captive, but now attention became concentrated upon him through the wild shriek that burst from his lips. Sinclair's face became distorted; a babble of meaningless words followed. The spectacle was distressing.

"This boy has lost his reason," declared Bellamy. For the third time he ignored "The Priest," and addressed the Commander of the submarine.

Von Ehrlich swallowed hard.

"You can decide for yourself," continued Bellamy, as a succession of shrieks followed. "Don't you recognise madness when you see it?"

The Commander gave a sign to one of the jailers. The seaman started to move forward.

"Stay where you are," ordered "The Priest."

The man, obviously bewildered, looked from one to the other.

"Release the younger prisoner," said his superior officer curtly.

"You realise—— ?"

"I realise everything, including the fact that this boy's brain has snapped."

"Then he had better be treated like the ordinary mad dog," was the reply—and the speaker pulled a revolver from his pocket.

Sinclair kept his face down as the sailor freed his wrists. So far the wheeze had worked—he did not care what happened to him once he got near enough to "The Priest" to put his hands on the other's throat. Revolver or no revolver, he was going to do that much.

The idea to feign sudden madness had come to him out of the blue, as it were, and he had instantly acted on it. He had hoped that something might materialise, although he had scarcely dared to expect that he would be released from his irons.

But now, here he was, with both wrists and ankles free. What the Commander intended to do with him he did not know—and that, for the moment, was none of his business. He had something else to engage his attention.

Maintaining the vacant expression he had assumed a couple of minutes before, he suddenly leapt clear of his guards, and, before "The Priest" who had been watching the proceedings so far with a satirical smile on his thin lips could raise his gun, Hugh had crashed a terrific blow home on the point of the crook's jaw.

Just as the man was swept off his feet like

a wooden toy pushed over by a child in a fit of temper, the submarine itself seemed to have gone crazy: she began to tilt up and down like a rocking-horse, sinking now by the head and then by the stern. Both the prisoners felt that the vessel was gradually losing her natural buoyancy—which meant that she must be sinking.

Commander Karl von Ehrlich was a good sailor; and, like a good sailor, he thought only of the danger which threatened his craft. He ignored the unconscious figure of the man who had been knocked senseless; he turned his back on the staring Bellamy; he even put out of his mind the fact that the captive he had ordered to be released on account of a fit of threatened mania had escaped in the confusion.

"What the hell's the matter?" he demanded as, struggling to reach the door, he collided with his first officer, who had evidently come to warn him.

The first officer's face was ashen. Bellamy, straining to hear, was able to catch a word here and there.

"... Wrong ... Depth ... Rudder ... Sinking fast ... Any deeper ... Crushed ... What ...?" Further words were cut off, for from outside came the unmistakable but dread sounds of men panicking.

Bellamy looked at Sinclair. Both knew what the other was thinking. Somehow they must take advantage of this unexpected peril to attempt to escape. But how?

Then came a fresh development. Bellamy started coughing, and was followed by Von

Ehrlich and the seaman who remained. The acrid smell of chlorine gas, with which he was familiar, began to fill the Secret Service man's throat, nose, mouth and lungs with an intolerable torture. But, even in the midst of this fresh danger, he was able to think sufficiently clearly to realise what had happened. Piecing the words he had just heard the first officer say, and filling in the blanks, he realised that in diving—no doubt in order to hide from a passing vessel—something must have gone wrong with the submarine's depth rudder. This would account for the peculiar and alarming tilting that had been experienced. The danger was, of course, that, the lower the submarine went, the greater became the risk of the terrific pressure of water crushing her. Then, on the top of everything else, she had commenced to generate this poisonous chlorine gas—a risk that had always to be run by men who served in the undersea boats. The fearful pressure was forcing sea water through the seams of the submarine, and it had got into the sulphuric acid of the batteries.

There was only one thing to be done. Would the Commander give the order which might yet save them from a death too agonising even to be imagined? Bellamy tried to shout himself—but was forestalled.

"Blow the tanks," Von Erhlich gasped, before reeling forward on his face.

The next moment everything was blotted out for Bellamy.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN — IN THE NICK OF TIME

CAPTAIN NEVILLE FRYER, of H.M. Destroyer *Reliance*, gasped at the sight. Rising rapidly from the sea, only forty yards away, was a submarine—and she was unmistakably one of the latest Ronstadtian models. So much the blinding rays of the searchlight revealed.

"Well, I'm damned!" he said. "They're not going to pump a torpedo at us, are they?"

His next in command considered the idea.

"They know we can't either ram her or fire. Not with a girl on board," he amended hastily.

Then a megaphoned voice sounded over the waste of water.

"Please do not fire—we are helpless."

"Think it's a trick?" asked Fryer.

The attendant midshipman shook his head.

"Search me, sir," he said. "Are you going to send a boat?"

"Yes," was the reply, "and you shall come with me."

So it happened that, five minutes later, a party of British sailors, heavily armed and with lifebelts round their bodies, stepped on to the wet deck of the submarine.

They were received by a hugely-built man whose nerve appeared broken.

"I am Captain Fryer, of His Majesty's ship *Reliance*," started the British officer, "and I

must ask you, please, to hand over to me all British persons you have on board. You must also place yourself and your submarine at the disposal of the British authorities."

"The Z51 is in urgent need of repair," was the answer; "otherwise——"

"I imagined something of the sort," broke in the other. "And now, please, I wish to ascertain that Miss Bertram is safe."

The doctor put up his stethoscope.

"No great harm done," he announced, "although you were lucky, young lady."

"Dr. McAllister!" expostulated Susan Bertram. "How heartless, to say such a thing after all I have suffered!" But considering that the arm of a fellow patient was about her at the time, a certain discount must be given to the words.

The medical man gave one of the twinkling smiles that had made him famous in Welbeck Street.

"Well—good luck!" he said enigmatically. "Let me know if I can do anything else—send a wedding present or something of that sort."

The door closed behind him.

"Did you hear what he said, Hugh?" asked the girl.

"Yes—but patients suffering from chlorine gas poisoning are not supposed to do much talking. Just relax, baby," Sinclair continued, giving a wonderful imitation of Robert Montgomery in one of his earlier films.

But you cannot stop a girl who has passed

through the shadow of death talking—especially when the arms of the man she loves are holding her close.

"I still can't believe we're alive—and safe," she murmured.

"Well, we are—isn't that proof?" as he kissed her.

"Yes, darling. Will Sir Harker Bellamy get over it, do you think?"

"Bet your sweet life," was the reply. "There's nothing on this earth can snuff out 'The Mole.' If there had been he would have died from the fumes of his own tobacco years ago. . . . Hallo! Someone's ringing," as the phone bell sounded. "Shall I answer it?"

"Yes, dear, if you will."

It was a good thing that Hugh Sinclair had his back turned; otherwise, Susan must have noticed the change in his face.

For these were the words that came to him over the wire:

"This is 'The Priest' talking. Oh, I know I'm supposed to be safe in prison—but I have several valuable friends in London, and they saw to it that the prison van did not reach the jail. If you look in your evening paper to-night you will see the report of a somewhat sensational happening in the suburbs. As a result of that happening I am still a free man—so look out for yourself, Sinclair. You might also pass the message on to your esteemed chief. My kindest regards to Miss Bertram"—there was a pause—"whom I hope to see very shortly."

Sinclair slowly replaced the receiver.

"Who was it, Hugh?" Susan called.

He had to do some hasty improvisation.

" Some clergyman fellow, from what I could make out."

" Clergyman fellow ? "

" Yes—he wanted to know when we were to be married."

" Hugh, you're pulling my leg."

He looked down at her.

" Well, we *are* to be married some time, aren't we ? "

" Of course, darling."

In the moment of rapture that followed, Sinclair was able to blot out everything else.

And if " The Priest " started any more of his damned nonsense, he'd give him *two* cracks on the jaw instead of one !

MEN IN MASKS

CHAPTER ONE — AN ADVENTURE STARTS

THE young man whose strong white teeth were clamped so tightly on the stem of his pipe, draped a leg gracefully over the side of the chair and scoffed.

"To my mind, Chief, it's pure cock-eye," he said.

Sir Harker Bellamy, C.M.G., whose success in managing the affairs of that important branch of British Intelligence known as Q.1 had brought him the imperishable nickname of "The Mole," slowly filled a battered briar with some villainous-looking plug tobacco. It was not until he had got this unholy concoction well alight that he vouchsafed a reply.

"Wait a minute, Stanford. Hold your horses until you hear some further details."

But the younger man continued to scoff.

"What more do I want to know?" he flung back. "A meeting of responsible 'heads' of the Secret Service of various important countries, including France and America, is down to be held to-night at the house of the British Foreign Secretary—and that high-hat jackass wants us all to go in fancy dress."

"The Mole" nodded.

"You are to be Mephistopheles," he confirmed, with a faint suspicion of a smile.

"The devil I am! As I said before, Chief,

it's pure cock-eye, like the worst kind of British film. Old man Poynder has been reading too many detective stories lately—there's the explanation."

"No doubt." The Foreign Secretary's predilection for the more sensational type of relaxational reading matter had been recently broadcast to the world through the medium of the popular press. According to "Spy-Glass," the gossip writer of the *Morning Miracle*, Lord Poynder considered no evening complete without finishing off the latest shocker.

"The Mole" puffed vigorously at his insanitary pipe.

"Those are the instructions," he stated, "and we have to obey them."

Myles Stanford nodded.

"What a life!" he groaned. "In the first place, where and how do I get this make-up? And is it considered *infra dig.*, when you go out to dinner as the Devil, to sit on the end of your tail . . . ? Oh, well, I'll be seeing Naomi in any case—till to-night, then, Chief." He rose, holding out his hand.

"I'll send a car to fetch you," offered Bellamy.

"Thanks. Jolly decent of you. I suppose the proper way to take the air as Mephistopheles is to hire a Daimler, but as my own bus is in dock I won't argue any more about it."

It was not until he was half-way down Whitehall that the young Secret Service man remembered he had not inquired of his respected but ruthless taskmaster in what capacity he was going himself. He chuckled as he wondered

whether Bellamy would paint himself all over with brown paint and go disguised, simply and artistically, as a—mole.

By the time he had reached the War Office the savour of this small joke had petered out, and he was free to allow his thoughts to wander in a more attractive direction. Crossing the road by the Admiralty Arch, he walked slowly down the Mall. There was a very powerful compensation for the ridiculous mummery in which he was to participate that night. Naomi Trentham, who sometimes acted as hostess for her uncle, the Foreign Secretary, provided a tremendously piquant contrast to Lord Poynder. Whereas the latter was vague and marvellously elusive (his only interests in life were supposed to be European politics and the study of Erastian philosophy), his niece combined an almost miraculous beauty with extraordinary physical energy. Naomi Trentham did everything that could be done—she rode, she played both golf and tennis, danced, found time to manage a flock of servants in a manner that evoked audible admiration from everybody who visited Poynder House—in short, she was one of the most talked-of figures in London. On the side, Naomi was also forced to devote a considerable amount of time to listening to proposals. That up to this stage she had turned all of them down was due to two principal reasons: the first, that she was delighting too much in her own freedom to wish to feel tied in any way; and the second was that, since she had met Myles Stanford a couple of months before, all other men had suffered in comparison.

Myles Stanford had never considered himself the marrying sort—his wasn't exactly the kind of job that went well with matrimony—but now, as he remembered the smile Naomi Trentham had given him when he wished her good night after the American Embassy dance two days before, he had the very dickens of a job in fighting the desire to call a taxi and give the man the order to drive straight to Clarges Square. Instead, being a young man who had learned to keep a very good control over his feelings, he walked straight back to his rooms in St. James's Street. As he let himself in, he resolved on one thing, however: that very night as ever was he would ask Naomi Trentham if he could bag a photograph. It would look rather well on his mantelpiece. . . .

Durant, his thin-visaged valet, who looked so much like a manservant that he could not possibly have followed any other occupation in the world, greeted him with his usual melancholy.

"A gentleman has called, sir," he announced funereally.

No doubt it was the intrusion of Durant's lugubrious dial on his recent roseate thoughts—this valet of his was almost as great a contrast to Naomi as Naomi was to her comic-opera uncle—that caused Myles to stare angrily at his servitor.

"Who is it?" he demanded.

Durant performed a little face-slipping.

"He's a clergyman, sir," humbly submitted the presser of pants and the tie-er of ties.

"A clergyman?" Myles Stanford's acquaint-

ance with the Church was pronouncedly sketchy even for these unregenerate days. Why should a clergyman call on him?

"Yes, sir, a clergyman—he is in full canonicals."

The speaker's employer received this additional information without registering any undue excitement. It was one of Durant's little idiosyncrasies that he occasionally resorted to flowers of speech that would not bear strict analysis.

"'Full canonicals'—I suppose you mean he's wearing a dog's collar?"

"And spats," supplied the valet.

The notion of a clergyman calling on him so becomingly garbed appealed to Stanford's always riotous sense of humour.

"Spats!" he echoed.

"He presented so respectable an appearance generally, sir, that I made bold to tell him I was expecting you at any moment. That was why I showed him into the sitting-room. . . . They were black spats, sir."

"Did he give you a card?"

"Yes, sir—my apologies for forgetting." Producing the inevitable salver, Durant placed the piece of pasteboard on it and held it in the direction of his master.

Stanford took the card. Neatly inscribed were the words: "The Rev. Oswald T. Pepper."

"Hot stuff," he muttered. We all have our weaknesses, and Myles Stanford's outstanding sin, in the opinion of so many of his friends, was his lamentable habit of cracking deplorably

bad jokes. He looked at the card again. "I hope not to bore you," was written in pencil above the name.

"I'll see him."

A cleric who called himself Pepper and who wore spats was something distinctly out of the ordinary.

When, a few moments later, he entered his comfortably furnished sitting-room overlooking St. James's Street, a slimly built man of middle age, irreproachably dressed in a dark suit of grey, rose to greet him. The caller wore, as Durant had said, spats—black, well-fitting spats.

"How do you do, Mr. Stanford?" The voice was firm and melodious. But it was not the man's lips that Stanford found himself studying. One of his chief missions in life (his life had depended on it on more than one occasion) was to sum up quickly the most salient feature of a person's face. And this man's eyes were remarkable: they were greyish-green in tint, and had a noticeable piercing quality.

"My name is Pepper," announced the caller. "That will convey nothing to you, of course, Mr. Stanford, but this fact will excuse, perhaps, my unwarrantable liberty in calling on you this morning. Last night I had the honour and pleasure of dining with Lord Poynder. He is greatly interested in my work."

"What is your work, Mr. Pepper?"

The other gave a little cough.

"I am the British Secretary for the Society of International Waifs and Strays. A charitable institution, Mr. Stanford, worthy of any

little help which you may care to give. There is existing at the present time, as you are no doubt aware, a tremendous amount of poverty and distress in the ravaged countries of Europe. Those who suffer particularly are the children —and it is the work of our Society to bring succour and help to these unfortunate little ones. We clothe and feed them and give them, whenever possible, a good education. Lord Poynder was good enough to promise me a cheque for a hundred guineas."

Stanford opened his cigarette-case and passed it to the speaker.

"Smoke?" he inquired.

"Thank you. I do not often indulge. . . ." But the Rev. Oswald T. Pepper extended a well-kept hand.

"I regard this as a very pleasant little break in the monotony of my daily life, Mr. Stanford," he said when he had lit up.

The Secret Service man sat down, after waving his visitor to another chair.

There was something wrong here, but he did not quite know what it was. This smooth-tongued caller was no usual psalm-singing parson; on the contrary, he was a very virile individual, unless he was wrong in his guess. And if his real name was Oswald T. Pepper, there had been something funny about his christening rites.

"It was that charming young lady, Miss Naomi Trentham, who mentioned your name to me," continued the visitor. "She thought that you might be interested in our work."

Myles stifled a smile. He could picture

Naomi talking to the Rev. Oswald T. Pepper about International Waifs and Strays. But beneath her good-humour there would have been a strong vein of seriousness. Naomi laughed first and reflected afterwards.

"If five guineas is any good, Mr. Pepper——" he said.

The other smiled.

"Thank you exceedingly—oh, thank you very much indeed."

But after the caller had departed, pocketing the cheque before reaching the door, the Secret Service man went back to his chair and remained very thoughtful.

There was something funny about this fellow. What it was he could not decide; he would have to ask Naomi a few questions that night.

In the meantime, there was work to be done.

"Durant!" he called.

The manservant seeped into the room.

"Yes, sir?"

"Durant, I am going to a fancy-dress ball to-night—don't laugh, you silly ass."

"I wasn't laughing, sir. In what capacity, sir?"

"As the Devil."

"Really, sir?"

"Yes, honest-to-God. Where can I get the necessary fal-de-dahs?"

"Foxalls are very good theatrical costumiers, sir. I should suggest them."

"Ring 'em up and tell them exactly what I want. Oh, and don't forget—I've got to wear

a mask. I shall feel like wearing it, I expect, after I've got into the tights."

"Yes, sir. I will telephone immediately, sir."

Left alone, Myles lit another pipe. Looking round for a box of matches, he espied a piece of paper lying on the carpet near the door. Walking over and picking it up, he saw with astonishment that it appeared to be part of a text: "In the midst of life we are in death." Round the words had been inscribed a circle done with red ink. Again he called: "Durant!" and when the valet had reappeared: "Are you in the habit of carrying texts about with you?"

"Texts, sir? Certainly not, sir." The man drew himself up with an attitude of justly-affronted pride.

"Well, how do you account for this?"

Durant took the torn piece of paper gingerly.

"I can't account for it, sir, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless the Rev. Pepper dropped it."

The reply which his master gave him was vague and non-committal.

"Pepper! Oh, yes, perhaps he did. Well, that's all, Durant. Got on to Foxalls, yet?"

"The number was engaged, sir, but I will ring them again."

"*In the midst of life we are in death.*"

Yes; that fellow Pepper *was* rummy.

CHAPTER TWO "THE MOLE" FROWNS

SIR HARKER BELLAMY was very occupied for at least an hour after the young member of his staff of whom he thought so highly had gone. For he had a great deal about which to reflect.

Again and again during that hour "The Mole" referred to a thick file of agents' reports which he had ordered his secretary to bring him immediately he was alone. It is safe to say that the news editors of the great London newspapers would have given much to have been granted access to these documents; for they told a story of international intrigue and the fragmentary details of a gigantic world conspiracy that would have caused the front pages of the Metropolitan dailies to blaze with real sensation. The Paris correspondent of the *Morning Miracle*, the most enterprising newspaper that London possessed, had evidently set his ear to the ground, for, pinned to one of the multifarious reports sent by the agent whose identity was hidden under the enigmatic "Q.15A," was the following clipping:

GIGANTIC SPY SENSATION

MANY SUSPECTS ARRESTED

MYSTERY JOURNEYS ACROSS EUROPE

WORLD-WIDE ORGANISATION DISCLOSED

(*From our own correspondent*)

PARIS, *Monday.*

What many believe will develop into the greatest spy drama ever disclosed is revealed here to-day after many months' secret and patient work by the French counter-espionage service.

This clever body of investigators, as the result of its discoveries, has arrested no fewer than thirty men and women, all of whom are alleged to be conspirators in a great espionage plot which has as its foundation the threatened peace of Europe.

So startling are the revelations promised that the French Government are not authorising any statement to be made in the Paris press until the work of the counter-espionage service has been completed. But this much can be said on reliable authority: not even during the World War was any spy service, that of Germany included, so vast-spread and possessing such gigantic ramifications as this conspiracy, particulars of which will shortly astound the world.

I learn to-night that the examining magistrate in charge of the case was able to establish definitely that the Foreign Power for which all these conspirators were acting was—Ronstadt.

The documents which have been seized at one of the head-quarters of the organisation are stated to be in almost every European language, many of them in Chinese. Some of these papers which it has been possible to decode so far relate particularly to naval and air defence systems of certain important European powers, including Great Britain.

Men of all nationalities, it is further stated, are involved; whilst, to make fact prove its parallel to fiction, several beautiful women of former high rank are definitely stated to have become paid agents of a Master Spy.

It is this Master Spy—referred to under various *aliases* and titles—who is causing the most acute anxiety to those responsible for the safety of France. At present this man's identity is unknown. But that he is a genius at organisation is self-evident from the facts already unearthed by the multitude of Secret Service agents employed on the work for the past six months. Somewhere in Europe (perhaps in Paris itself) this monstrous schemer, as one Sûreté official described him to me, spends his days and nights weaving his stupendous spider's web—and it is the duty of the counter-espionage chiefs to find him. Whether they will be successful or not no one can say at present.

That this man works from outside Ronstadtian territory is fairly certain, it is thought. That a horde of men and women obey him and are on his pay-roll is even more definitely established. There are foreigners of various nationalities involved, and—melancholy fact, this—Frenchmen who have become traitors to their country are also amongst those under arrest.

These mysterious agents of an even more mysterious chief spy belong to all classes of society. Some are declared to be wealthy, whilst others are in the poorest circumstances. Others, again, are said to be related to persons who hold official positions under the State; whilst yet others, as is always the case, went to their ruin through becoming the unconscious tools of stronger minds.

Inquiries are still being actively pursued in Paris and the suburbs, as well as in many other large French cities. Inquiries have also been made on the Riviera and abroad.

As I have said before, this discovery will probably go down to history as the most gigantic spy conspiracy ever disclosed; in fact, the whole thing would read more like the feverish imaginings of some sensational novelist than sober truth if sufficient facts had not already been placed in the records to prove up to the hilt every statement I make in this dispatch.

Bellamy, lighting his villainous pipe again, frowned. He knew that for once a journalist employed on a sensation-loving newspaper had

not over-stated the truth. The repercussions of this affair had had their effect across the Channel. The British Government had been sorely troubled; in fact, it was directly due to information sent by the French officials that Lord Poynder had called for that evening a meeting of responsible Secret Service chiefs representing various countries, including the United States.

Pushing the papers on one side, "The Mole" leaned back in his seat. He could not get out of his mind the memory of a certain man—a hated enemy—who, a few months back, had once again slipped out of his hands when it seemed certain that he was destined to spend several years in a prison cell. That remarkable criminal known as "The Priest" had escaped whilst being taken from Portsea to London after the conclusion of the alarming submarine sensation*; and, although every port had been watched and every other precaution taken, he had remained at liberty. Was it possible that the mystery chief of this gigantic spy organisation was "The Priest," returned to virulent life again as the arch-enemy of England? It seemed possible—even probable; such a post would appeal to the flamboyant daring of the most dangerous crook with whom he had ever crossed swords.

He ought to have warned Myles Stanford about "The Priest," he supposed. Stanford, recently returned from the Far East, where he had done extremely valuable work, had not

* See "The Devil and the Deep."

yet run across this unfrocked clergyman turned master-criminal. But if, as he believed would turn out to be the case, it was discovered that "The Priest" was intimately concerned in this fresh threat to the peace of the world, Stanford and he were bound to collide. That fact in itself was a compliment to the young Secret Service man in whom the British Foreign Secretary (perhaps because of a whispered word from his niece) had already evinced a great deal of interest. He would put him on his guard that night when he met Stanford at Lord Poynder's Clarges Square residence.

What purpose the British Foreign Secretary could have in his mind in assigning certain well-known characters to the representatives of the Secret Services attached to the various European Powers with whom Great Britain was friendly, he did not know. Of course, the function at Poynder House that night came more or less under the designation of a masquerade —"Fancy dress essential," the invitation cards had read—but there must have been some purpose behind the suggested mummery. Lord Poynder might look—indeed, he did—as though he had strayed out of the Ark, but in spite of his many eccentricities he was generally credited with being the most astute Foreign Secretary of the last forty years.

With this reflection "The Mole" knocked the ashes from his pipe and turned his thoughts in another direction. Mental concentration had made him hungry; he wanted his lunch.

CHAPTER THREE — "THE PRIEST" MAKES READY

IN a quiet suburban house in a quiet but decidedly drab London suburb, two men were engaged in what to any onlooker would have certainly appeared a very curious occupation. This room, small in size, insignificant in design and entirely characterless in appearance, was not a dressing-room behind a theatre stage, and yet one of the two was assiduously busy in turning the man seated in the chair before the long mirror into a passable imitation of a person whose photograph was propped up on the impromptu dressing-table.

The man being transformed was quick to offer suggestions.

"I must not look a day over twenty-six," he stated. "And it must be a twenty-six that will stand scrutiny from the sharpest pair of eyes in the world at not more than two yards distance. Can you guarantee that?"

The other shrugged indifferently.

"Am I an artist or am I a bungler?" he returned, with an air of complete nonchalance. "It may sound extravagant, but by the time I have finished, the sharpest pair of eyes in the world, as you have called them, will be completely deceived."

But the other persisted.

"My future liberty—perhaps my life itself—is in your hands, Blumberg."

The transformer shed his indifference.

"Did not Kuhnreich himself send me to England three months ago?" he grumbled. "It is enough."

The work went on, and whilst it proceeded the man in the chair thought deeply. The remark he had made a few moments before was strictly and literally true. Upon the skill of Blumberg depended so much that, if he had not possessed nerves so dependable that they had proved themselves able to withstand almost any shock, he would have been terrified. But "The Priest" was a gambler at heart; he delighted in taking impossible chances. Perhaps that was why he had brought off so many coups as a master-criminal.

Nine months before he had escaped from England by the merest margin. Whilst hunted high and low, the aeroplane sent secretly to England had carried him safely out of the country he hated. He had lived abroad ever since.

Lived—and worked. For it was largely through the cunning instrumentality of his brain that the colossal spy web which Kuhnreich had ordered him to engineer had been brought to such a state of perfection. Another month, and——

But the mischief which had been done through the careless babblings of a subordinate worker in the Toulon branch must be repaired.

That was why he had come himself, at the direct command of the Dictator of Ronstadt, to London, risking, as he had said, not merely his liberty but his life in doing so. That night he was to take the greatest chance of his career. If it proved successful—if he carried away from that secret conference a résumé of the plans made by the Intelligence chiefs of the various countries with whom Ronstadt might sooner or later be at war, he would have the right to ask Kuhnreich for almost anything. Crosber, the Chief of the Ronstadtian Secret Police, had been aghast at his daring; but when the old man had urged him to take care, he had merely shrugged. What was life without risk? he had retorted.

There was only one method by which he could learn the secret he wished, and that was to attend the conference masquerading as one of the chosen representatives. He had given careful thought to the various figures, and had decided on young Myles Stanford, who, with his chief, Sir Harker Bellamy—what memories that name conjured up!—would be present as representing Great Britain. He had gained this information only a few days before, and had then made his decision.

But, all the same, he could not conceal from himself the fact that the risk was staggering. Although the additional information had come that, owing to the eccentric whim of the curious-minded British Foreign Secretary, every representative at that conference would appear in fancy dress, he had to be prepared for any emergency. If the order was given for un-

masking, once the door was locked behind the meeting, he must present to the others a life-like representation of the man he was supposed to be. Would Bellamy's sharp eyes be deceived? And, if they were not—— ?

But, if the risk was great, so the reward was in proportion. And, as in every great adventure, there were certain chances in his favour. He was about the same build as Myles Stanford; he had studied the young man's voice during the talk that morning so intently that he believed he could use much the same intonation, and, above all, who would imagine that there would be a masquerader at such a secret meeting? Credentials? If need be, he would apply to Sir Harker Bellamy himself to prove his identity!

At the end of another five minutes Blumberg ceased to work those busy hands of his.

"Now stand up and look at yourself closely," he said.

The effect was remarkable. Something like thirty odd years had slipped off his shoulders. As he stared into the glass, "The Priest" saw, not the man he knew himself to be, but a youngster of twenty-six—and he would have been ready to swear that the reflection in the mirror was Myles Stanford's, accredited representative of the British Government at the meeting that night.

Blumberg himself was delighted.

"It is my masterpiece," he said. "I have never done anything so good."

This was self-praise indeed, for the man who spent his time disguising the agents who went

into other countries to work for Kuhnreich was a genius in make-up.

"Yes," the other agreed, "it is remarkable."

"It is my masterpiece," declared Blumberg again.

Before either became aware of the fact, so engrossed was each in the contemplation of the master-disguiser's art, a third man had joined them. He came, silently and unexpectedly, through an opening to the left of the mirror. "The Priest" had devised this ingenious get-away in case of accidents. Once through this secret door and he could be quickly in the house adjoining, which, by a curious whim of the owner, had a "For Sale" board prominently displayed in the derelict small front garden, although negotiations were never allowed to go beyond the house-agents' bland announcement to each and every inquirer: "I am very sorry, but I am afraid the property in question has just been disposed of."

This new-comer, a short, heavily-built man with a grey, lined face, watched the pair for some time before breaking in on their mutual congratulation. Then he coughed.

"The Priest" swung round with an oath.

"My God, Krieg!" he said harshly. "You get more like a ghost every day! Why didn't you let me know you were coming?"

The other made no apology.

"One has to be discreet," he replied. "I preferred to come myself without sending any letter. I have a message from Kuhnreich," he went on.

At the mention of the man who was the

most powerful figure in Europe, who, moreover, was feared and hated by every other Government in modern Western civilisation, both hearers instinctively stood at attention. There was no other living person to whom "The Priest" would have shown so much respect.

"A message from Kuhnreich," he repeated.

"Yes," was the slow answer. "His Excellency says that if you are successful to-night in learning the future plans of this ridiculous Secret Service Conference, you can ask from him the Order of the Triple Cross."

The man who was made up to look thirty years younger than he really was, waved a hand.

"To hell with the Triple Cross. My dear Krieg, you will have more sense, I hope, than to be indiscreet enough to pass my words back?" as the emissary made an ejaculation. "But cash-in-hand is always my motto. I'm not such an ass as to risk my life just for the sake of wearing a piece of tinted ribbon on the lapel of my dress-coat when I go out to dinner."

This expression of *lèse-majesté* evoked a further muttered growl from the highly-placed member of the Ronstadtian Embassy, but the man who had given expression to it merely smiled.

"And if it wasn't that I intended to get the laugh once again over that self-important ass, Harker Bellamy, I don't know that I would take all this trouble. But as I am—C.O.D., which in good Anglo-Saxon, my dear Krieg, means money upon delivery of the goods."

"It shall be paid," said the other stiffly. As

the official in charge of the Ronstadtian espionage system in England, and, as such, being directly responsible to Kuhnreich, the man who had placed himself in absolute control of something like eighty million human beings, he knew the value of this renegade Englishman. For money—sufficient money—" The Priest " would always be willing to risk his neck—but what was vastly more important, he had proved himself able to bring off *coups* that seemed impossible.

Such a man had to be humoured.

" That's all right. Now, tell me, Krieg, what do you think of my transformation ? "

" It is my masterpiece," put in Blumberg modestly.

" Who are you supposed to be ? " inquired the Embassy emissary.

" Myles Stanford, the Secret Service agent who, together with his Chief, Sir Harker Bellamy, has been chosen to represent Great Britain at the Conference to-night."

" Well, I must admit, Blumberg, you've done a great piece of work."

" It is my masterpiece," willingly admitted that artist.

" But how did you arrange it ? " was Krieg's next question.

" It was not very difficult. Ever since I arrived back in England I have been gathering information about this Conference. I got to know in this way that young Stanford would probably be chosen to attend this meeting. That was why, in the guise of the Rev. Oswald T. Pepper, a zealous worker in the International

Waifs and Strays charitable movement, I call on him this morning. He was very affable—and actually gave me a cheque for five guineas!"

"But the photograph"—pointing towards the looking-glass.

"I obtained it from a famous Bond Street photographer—even young men working for the British Intelligence are not averse to having their portraits taken I have discovered—especially when they happen to be attracted to young women occupying prominent positions in the public eye."

"Who is the young lady in question?"

"Miss Naomi Trentham, niece of Lord Poynder."

"The British Foreign Secretary!" exclaimed Krieg.

"I understand that is the office he holds at the present time."

The other stared at the speaker.

"You have a colossal nerve," he remarked.

"The Priest" smiled.

"If I did not possess that quality, I shouldn't be of much use to my worthy patron, Kuhnreich."

With that the interview closed.

CHAPTER FOUR — THE PRISONER

STANFORD choked back something which sounded suspiciously like profanity.

"What on earth do I look like, Durant?" he demanded.

"If I may say so, sir," returned the servitor, "you present a very impressive figure—quite *distingué*, in fact."

"The deuce—I mean the devil—I do! All the same, I wish I could cut off this tail; I keep falling over it."

"The tail is the most effective part, sir; you could not possibly dispense with your tail."

"That's all you know about it. . . . Mask on straight?"

"Yes, sir, quite straight."

"All right. Now go out and see if the car has come—Sir Harker Bellamy was sending his own."

"Yes, sir."

Within a couple of minutes Durant was back.

"The car is waiting, sir," he announced.

"Good. Now clear out, because I'm going to run. I feel the biggest fool in the world."

If both statements were exaggerations of the truth, the fact remains that Stanford was very quickly inside the saloon car that he found waiting at the kerb. A couple of passers-by had

stopped to gasp at the unexpected apparition—and that was enough for him. Thank heaven he was wearing the mask!

The car started off at a dazzling speed, but Myles was in no mood to rebuke the chauffeur. He leaned back in the well-cushioned seat with a sigh of thankfulness. He was over the first fence.

Then, as the car sped past St. James's Palace and emerged into the comparative quietude of the Mall, he experienced his first surprise. This wasn't either of Sir Harker Bellamy's usual two buses. "The Mole" must have invested in a new car. Very roomy and palatial. The Bedford cord upholstery was distinctly posh.

It was just at this moment that Stanford, looking in front of him, noticed the ears of the driver. These stuck out in a rather disconcerting manner. Such luxurious sprouting did not seem to fit in with the expensive limousine. Come to that, he didn't care for their appearance on any count.

This must be a new driver. Morris, who usually drove "The Mole," had ears that would have passed without comment in any grade of society. But these aural appendages . . . he certainly didn't like the look of them. They were the sort of ears that an ostentatious crook might have worn as symbols of his calling.

Stanford had been long enough in the criminal game to know that a great deal of importance could be attached to human ears. For ears were the only part of a man's face that could not be changed or altered. Once there, they were there for life.

He was still speculating on this point when he noticed that the car was taking the wrong route. Lord Poynder lived in Clarges Square, but the driver, very intent on his job, was speeding down Grosvenor Place in the direction of Victoria.

He stood up, vaguely alarmed. But the tapping on the window brought no result ; in spite of his ear acreage, the driver was either deaf or determined not to give any heed to the clamouring.

Myles repeated his rapping—and then came an even more curious happening : the left hand of the driver went out, something clicked, and, to Stanford's astonishment, what seemed to be a sheet of steel appeared, as though by magic, over the glass framework separating him from the driver. At the same time the interior of the car darkened, for a similar phenomenon had occurred in connection with both windows ; whilst travelling at well over forty miles an hour, he had been trapped as securely as though a prison cell had closed behind him.

The first thing he did was to try the doors. Unnoticed before, he now observed that neither had a handle ! Having made this discovery, he leaned back into his seat. This was a situation that called for coolness and not loss either of nerve or temper.

A third discovery came quickly. Tapping the sides of the car, he realised that, instead of the usual structure, this limousine was plated with steel. An armoured car, in fact.

Now—*what ?* The problem was quickly solved. By a piece of daring planning, marked

by much ingenuity, he had been taken prisoner. Why? Again his racing brain supplied the solution. Wasn't he supposed to be on his way to a very important conference of Secret Service chiefs? The man who had planned this stunt not merely wished him out of the way, but must have resolved to take his place at the conference in Poynder House.

He had scoffed at that meeting only a few hours before, but now he was obliged to change his views. The fact that each member of the conference had been ordered to attend masked and attired in some grotesque fancy costume (here he bethought him of his tail, and cursed most volubly) had helped the schemer's plan. Only a keen student of human psychology could have imagined this thing and brought the *coup* off successfully.

Who had done it? His mind went instantly to the suave-mannered visitor of that morning, the Rev. Oswald T. Pepper, British Secretary of the International Waifs and Strays Society. Yes. . . . And he remembered something more: the piece of paper he had picked up from the floor; that scrap of paper which had contained the very pregnant words: "In the midst of life we are in death."

Very, very amusing—if one was inclined to laugh at that sort of thing. Personally, he wasn't.

All around him was complete darkness. An amazing situation; he was as surely cut off from the rest of the world—barring a collision, of course—as though he were on a desert island. He was forced to admire the brain-power of this schemer; but when he got out . . .!

There did not seem any immediate prospect of this desideratum being achieved. The car, still driven apparently with a fine disregard for safety, sped on and on.

Myles Stanford cursed.

CHAPTER FIVE — MASQUERADE

NAOMI TRENTHAM stood receiving her guests. She had selected the rôle for that night's entertainment of a Grecian shepherdess, and the dress—what there was of it—became her exceedingly.

Over a hundred invitations had been sent out to this Mayfair *bal masque*, and each guest, as he or she showed up, appeared to outvie the other in mingled magnificence and bizarrerie of costume. It gave her a series of thrills to which she tried to find expression in a succession of repressed delighted gasps; but all the time she was watching for a scarlet figure wearing (she hoped) a tail. Strictly speaking, the character of Mephistopheles, as she knew, did not call for such an ornamentation, but she would be terribly disappointed if Myles Stanford failed her in this respect.

Generally speaking, Lord Poynder, at least when his official duties were concerned, was remarkably uncommunicative. Indeed, as she had once remarked, an oyster was a high-powered orator compared with her uncle on such occasions. The fact that he had a genuine affection for her did not change the position. Whenever she put a pertinent question to him, he merely shook his head and told her that inquisitive little misses would be better occupied

in eating their buns — or words to that effect.

But on this occasion he had relented. For all his usual air of being out of the world, the Foreign Secretary was shrewdly observant, and he had been able to read her secret quite early on.

"What do you think of this young fellow Stanford, Naomi?" he had inquired.

"He's not bad," she admitted in return.

That was good enough for her uncle. No doubt it was because he felt he shared this secret that he had given her his confidence in at least one detail about that night's festivities. Perhaps he decided, as she was acting as his hostess, this much was due to her. In any case—and here was the main point—she knew that Myles Stanford was coming to a hush-hush conference that night at Poynder House—and far more important, that he would arrive attired —what a laugh!—in scarlet tights and wearing, if the gods were kind, a tail!

Her first thought was that any tempting on the part of this particular Mephistopheles would be quite attractive. Yes, she certainly felt different about Myles Stanford from what she felt about any other man she had ever known. In fact, he appeared to have quite a distinct and separate set of recommendations; and—she felt no shame in admitting it—she responded to practically every one of them!

Her heart gave a sudden jump. Through the door came a man wearing scarlet tights. He carried himself as any emissary of Lucifer might have been proud to do.

Myles!

But, when he approached nearer, she experienced a keen sense of disappointment. To begin with, he was tailless.

She could not check her impetuosity.

"Oh, Myles, where is your tail?" she burst out.

The flesh beneath the domino mask twitched, but the masquerader gave no reply. Yet, if his lips were silent, his eyes were sufficiently eloquent: they burned into hers.

She could feel there was something wrong—very wrong. These weren't Stanford's eyes; Myles's eyes would not have looked at her in that way. These eyes were avidly lecherous; if they had not sickened her, they might have been frightening.

She would have spoken, voicing her disgust, but the crush of visitors pressed the new-comer on. Mephistopheles had to make way for other characters eager to tread the stage.

"The Priest" passed on. For a moment or so his mind was switched off from the main business of the evening. God, how lovely that girl was! Lovely even when that uneasiness showed itself in her eyes. Did she actually suspect him? If so, it would be damnably awkward. There was yet time. . . . But this man who had thrown aside a surplice to become one of the master-crooks of the world would not allow himself to dwell upon such a contingency. He had come there to do a job of work, and at whatever risk to himself he would see it

through. *Coups* like this required a finesse and a courage which a lesser man could not possibly be expected to show.

An elderly man with stooped shoulders, dressed in ordinary evening attire, stepped aside to give him a greeting.

"Good evening, Stanford," he said in a low voice.

"Good evening, sir." During the few minutes he had spent with the young Secret Service man in his St. James's Street flat that morning, he had endeavoured to acquire every inflection of Stanford's voice. But, as he was taking no chances, he covered the three words with a cough.

"What's the matter—got a cold?"

"Yes," he said, and coughed again.

Lord Poynder pointed to a door on his right.

"We will go straight in," he said. . . . "Ah, I see my niece is beckoning me. . . . I shan't be a minute. You go on, my dear fellow."

Walking through the door, "The Priest" found himself in the company of six other men. All were grotesquely attired in the modern fashion of fancy dress.

As for his host, the Foreign Secretary spoke somewhat irritably when Naomi caught his arm.

"What is it, my dear? You know how busy I shall be for the next half-hour. You must carry on without me."

"I'm quite prepared to do that, darling, but I've got something to tell you first. Who was that man you've just sent into the library?"

He stared at her.

"You should know," he replied.

She caught his arm again.

"Listen, uncle," the low voice persisted. "That wasn't Myles Stanford."

"Not Stanford?" He seemed incredulous. "Whatever put such a notion into your head, child?" the Foreign Secretary went on.

It was difficult to find words that would provide a reasonable explanation. If she said the man's eyes had terrified her, her uncle would probably laugh, and with good reason.

"Put it down to feminine intuition, darling," she said. "Myles would have behaved differently from that man—I can't tell you more."

"Nonsense." But, as he turned away, Lord Poynder was thoughtful.

CHAPTER SIX THE END OF THE JOURNEY

EXPERIENCE had taught Myles Stanford that the first necessity when in a tight corner was not to lose one's head. So, after the first sulphurous outburst, he leaned back, intent on concentration.

What might be termed the basic fact was clear—but a great deal more mystery remained. Where was he being taken, and for what purpose had he been trapped?

He endeavoured to select the most likely out of a considerable number of enemies who could be responsible for this manœuvre, but always his mind returned to the suave-mannered gentleman in clerical mufti who had called on him with such a plausible yarn only that morning. Yes, his first conjecture had been right—there was something very distinctly phoney about the Rev. Oswald T. Pepper.

Myles's heart gave a sudden jump. That scrap of paper he had picked up from the carpet: did it represent a promise as well as a threat? Was he really being carted off to a modern gangster's slaughter-house. It seemed quite possible.

The car never slackened its pace; there were no traffic hold-ups; the driver must have had an expert knowledge of London.

How long had passed he could not have said,

but it seemed an age before, with a sudden jerk, the strangely constructed limousine stopped.

Now——!

But when the door on the right swung open, Myles saw two men, both holding revolvers, standing guard.

"Come on," said the foremost curtly; and, to the driver: "That'll be all, Joe. Scram!"

This scrap of Americanese was interesting, but before he could speculate further on it the prisoner was given a curt order.

"Come on out, you, and no fancy tricks, either."

This might have been a comic-opera extravaganza gone mad, thought Myles, as he obeyed the request. Masks were evidently in demand that night, for both the speaker and his companion had their faces completely covered.

As his right foot left the step of the car, it sank into thickish mud. Before him loomed what appeared to be a derelict mansion. The car had evidently driven in through the gates of a distant carriage drive, for many acres of ground stretched to right and left.

"When you've finished your sight-seeing, I'll be glad," broke in the voice of the chief guard. He was evidently of a surly disposition and difficult to please. Myles considered it would be better to humour him. Nothing could be gained by trying any rough stuff at the moment. Whilst death might be waiting, even that prospect was more pleasant than a summary dismissal from an existence which up to this date he had found quite reasonably agreeable.

"You go in front—and keep your hands behind your back," came the further order.

The walk was not a pleasant one. For one thing, the recent rain had turned the once-fine carriage-way into something closely approaching a morass, and Myles, fastidiously minded from his youth, had always hated to get his shoes soiled. But he carried on.

After walking for perhaps fifty yards he reached the entrance to what once must have been an imposing residence of the larger manor-house type. Here another strange thing happened: the front door opened apparently of its own volition. In any case, he did not see another myrmidon of the master-crook into whose hands he had fallen.

"Straight ahead!" The speaker no doubt had many faults, but he possessed at least one virtue—he didn't believe in over-talking.

Stanford had quick eyes, and he was trained in observation. He noticed immediately that the mansion inside was in about as bad a state of decay as its exterior. There were a number of large rooms stretching away to right and left of the big hall down which he now strode—but through the open doors he was able to see that they all contained a minimum of furniture and that the painter's brush had not been utilised for many years. What these rooms were he could not decide, beyond conjecturing that they formed the head-quarters of the gang whose machinations it was his job to outwit.

"Down the steps now."

Before him loomed a deep flight of stone steps. They led to goodness knew what—but

he had to traverse them, apparently. Quickly the thought came that if he were to put up any sort of resistance—however mad the prospect was—this was the time to chance his arm.

He half turned—only to feel something hard pressing against his ribs.

"If you want it now—you can have it."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I just wanted an explanation," he stated.

"You'll get that—if you wait," was the uncompromising rejoinder.

After that, what was there to do but to make the best of a bad job?

"Walk down the steps."

There were fifty or so of them, and at the bottom he stood in what had once been, no doubt, the kitchen quarters of the mansion. There was a huge room stretching away to the right, and in this was the first note of cheerfulness that he had yet encountered: a large coal fire was blazing in an old-fashioned grate.

"In there."

But if the fire was cheerful, the sight of the men who sat round it in a small group was certainly the reverse. In the whole of his acquaintance with the criminal forces of the world, Myles decided that he had never gazed upon a more disturbing convoy. Particularly noticeable was a sallow-visaged individual who, by some twisted mischance of fate, had had the misfortune to lose the better part of his left ear. It was he who stood up to receive the deputation.

"Here he is, Bunny," said the leader of the contingent. "You're to be responsible for him—see?"

To the mind of one person, at least, it was not a pleasing prospect—and when Half-Ear sidled towards him, a sadistic leer on his thin lips, Myles forgot the rules that he should have observed in this game, and overbid his hand. Without any warning whatever, he lunged forward and caught the maltreated one clean on the point of the jaw.

If a bomb had burst in that huge underground room the general confusion could not have been greater. It was one man against eight—but the lone fighter went down with colours flying. That he did go down was inevitable, of course—and when he was down he remained very still.

CHAPTER SEVEN — THE PASS-WORD

LORD POYNDER, standing at the head of the library table, looked down the two sides at which eight other men were seated.

"I feel I owe you an explanation, gentlemen," he said. "Some of you, no doubt, have secretly decried the method I have used in calling you together. I refer, of course, to the fancy dress effects. But," his voice becoming graver, "I think you will agree, upon reflection, that the special circumstances warranted extraordinary precautions. The reason I have asked you to retain your masks is that, in the event—the very rare event, I hope—of a Ronstadtian secret agent being present——" He stopped while a slight, mischievous smile lit up momentarily his anxious features.

The men he addressed were too well trained, too disciplined, had too great a control over their nerves to make any comment on this astounding suggestion, but the figure seated on the speaker's right (he wore the costume of a Carthusian friar) was seen to lean forward slightly in his chair, as the British Foreign Secretary continued:

"We must not forget, gentlemen, that great issues are at stake. Ronstadt, which is sparing no expense either in money or men, to build up the greatest espionage organisation the world

has ever known, would give a great deal to be represented at this conference. That is why I made my previous remarks. Now, in order that the *bona fides* of every man present shall be put to the test, I must ask you to write on the piece of paper before you the password previously decided upon. As you know, that password was given by the different Intelligence departments only to those selected to come here to-night. I will walk round the table and collect the papers myself after the word has been written."

It was a dramatic moment—a moment so charged with electric tension, in fact, that the suspense became almost unbearable. The man who now rose from his chair felt that he was master of ceremonies at the most important meeting he had ever attended in the course of a long and active life.

Had Naomi been mistaken? Was someone masquerading as Myles Stanford in that room? Had Ronstadt, by some clever *coup*, substituted her own agent instead of the assistant to Sir Harker Bellamy, who, garbed as a monk, still sat at the right end of the table. If so, disclosure would soon come.

It was perfectly true, as Stanford had irreverently put it when talking to his Chief, that the British Foreign Secretary read perhaps far too many detective novels; but Lord Poynder, while he silently yet bitterly scoffed at the immature products of the lesser brethren of the mystery craft, yielded whole-heartedly to the master minds; so much so, in fact, that if he had been entirely honest he would have

admitted that the idea of making every member enter the conference-room masked had been stolen from a particularly ingenious story which had beguiled him recently one night into the small hours.

The possibility of Ronstadt sending a spy to attend this conference had never been out of his mind since the opening of the negotiations. Kuhnreich, as he had very good reason to know, was a genius at strategy, and, although the idea may have appeared fantastic to the ordinary mind, it could not be dismissed as entirely improbable.

Even although the occasion was so important, the Foreign Secretary had derived a certain amount of pleasurable excitement from the thought. At heart he was an adventurer—it was the weakness of the flesh and not of the spirit that kept him out of the active lists; and there was nothing he would have liked quite so much as to have been able to stage the dramatic unmasking of the villain of the piece. In real life, that was; he played chess, using his secret agents as pawns, moving them across the board, but, seated in his Whitehall office, they had been more like phantoms than living men. This would have been the real thing.

There was a bright flush in his pale face as seven out of the eight figures seated at the table bent forward to write as he had requested. The eighth demurred.

It was Mephistopheles who put forward the objection.

"With all due respect to you, sir, I think it

is ridiculous," he said. "Hasn't this foolery been carried far enough?"

Lord Poynder smiled.

"My dear——" He stopped before uttering the name. "Perhaps you are right. But surely you would not refuse an old man's whim?"

"But it's wasting time——"

He was not allowed to go any further. The figure garbed as a Carthusian monk rose from his chair.

"Don't be a fool, Stanford," he said. "Sit down and write the password."

By this time the seven other men had folded their slips of paper and handed them to the Foreign Secretary.

The latter smiled at the recalcitrant one.

"Please," he urged. But the man he addressed made no move to reseat himself. Instead, he backed to the window.

"This is the most awful rot," he scoffed, "and I'm not going to have anything more to do with it."

A subdued clamour of voices arose, but Lord Poynder hushed the noise with an uplifted hand.

"Perhaps you are right, Stanford," he said surprisingly. "I admit I have played the fool. Give me your hand." He held out his hand for the disputant to shake.

In spite of the increasing conviction that Naomi was right—if this fellow was really Myles Stanford he would not have behaved in such an astounding manner—he wanted to make doubly sure: Stanford had a scar on the back of his right hand, running from the

knuckle of the index finger for a distance of a couple of inches. This relic of a thrilling scrap, which would have put nine out of every ten present-day world's heavyweight championships to shame, could be easily detected.

"Oh, all right, sir," was the response, after a moment's hesitation.

The hand which was outheld carried no scar.

And now another person took a part.

"You'll stay just where you are, my friend" —and there, looking decidedly belligerent in spite of his cowl, the Carthusian friar was standing with a revolver in his right hand.

"Gentlemen," said the unmistakable voice of Sir Harker Bellamy, "we cannot let this man get away from the room. He is a spy."

Followed chaos. It was like a scene out of a crazy film—with the operator himself gone mad.

As a start, Mephistopheles lunged sideways, with the result that Bellamy, usually a sure shot, missed his aim. As the scarlet-tighted one eluded this kiss of death, he flung something into the centre of the room. Instantly, following a slight explosion, huge, billowing clouds of acrid smoke not merely obscured the atmosphere, but sent every man's hand to his mouth in the endeavour to check the racking cough that filled his lungs with torture.

After that there was a crash—and the broken glass of the window let in fresh air to fight with the tainted atmosphere of the poison-charged room.

In the meantime, the spy had vanished.

CHAPTER EIGHT — THE DUELLO

ALL this while, Naomi Trentham was worried. She knew all about her duties as a hostess, but she was in no mood for observing the conventions. Whilst she went from group to group, her mind was occupied with only one thought: What had happened to Myles Stanford?

Notwithstanding the fact her uncle had pooh-poohed her suggestion that the man who had come attired as Mephistopheles that night was a masquerader, she felt, deep down in her heart, that something terrible had happened. Although Myles Stanford had a habit of playing the fool, she was convinced he would have behaved in an entirely different manner from the man she had watched go a few minutes before into the library.

What was to be done? If her reasoning was to be relied upon, then the whole future of Europe might be in peril. It was useless, of course, to attempt to argue with her uncle again: he would have no patience with her, and might be very angry at the interruption.

There was only one thing for it—she must take action herself. Slipping away unobserved, she went to her room, made a hasty change, put on a raincoat over her simple frock, and, using the servants' staircase, reached the garage.

As she drove her sports car quietly out into the square, she argued: If this man was a masquerader, as she feared, he would attempt, if discovered, to make a dramatic getaway. She must be prepared for that. Prepared to follow him, also, no matter where he went.

Leaving her engine running, she slipped back into the grounds, and took up a position outside the library window.

It was a gruelling wait—but, mercifully for her peace of mind, it was not of long duration. After the sound of muffled voices had come to her, she heard an outbreak of extraordinary coughing—and then a sudden crash.

A man had flung himself headlong out of the window. Even through the darkness she was able to see that he wore the costume of Mephistopheles.

She was gripped by a sense of joyous excitement. She had been proved right! Following quickly after the man as he picked himself up and ran for the adjoining street, she told herself that she would track this spy and hand him over to the authorities. But not before he had come through with the truth concerning Myles Stanford. In the excitement of the moment she did not wait for any wiser counsel to prevail; the conviction that Myles was in danger upheld, sustained and urged her on.

The big car which she had been pursuing with such tenacity turned down a lane. Naomi, hot on the chase, followed without a moment's hesitation. She did not give a thought to the

possibility of running into danger herself, but when she saw a couple of men pile out of the limousine she stopped her engine and followed them on foot.

Her feet sank into mud, but she was not deterred—not until her headlong flight was checked by a stinging blow in the right shoulder. She had seen one of the men point a revolver at her, but decided to call his bluff. It was not until she reeled backwards that she realised the truth.

Myles Stanford awoke to consciousness with two predominant impressions. The first was that someone had been beating a tattoo on his head with a heavy hammer, and the second was that someone else had taken equally unpardonable liberties with his tongue. That usually useful member must have become swollen to about ten times its normal size, whilst the rest of his mouth contained a taste that deserved to be photographed, for mere words would not have been able to give an adequate description. Groping about in his mind, he slowly remembered what had happened: after delivering that clip on the jaw to Half-Ear, he had been the principal figure in the fiercest rough-house he had ever experienced.

As a result, he had been very effectually blotted out. Lucky to have escaped with his life, he supposed. But here he was, alive and—no, he couldn't kick, he found, because both his ankles and wrists were securely fastened.

Where had they put him? Wriggling with his shoulders, he decided at length that he had either been buried alive or that he had been placed in some kind of cupboard. Gradually, as the sense of horror at his position subsided, he knew that the second alternative was probably the correct one. At any rate, he could hear voices. Then he noticed a crack in the woodwork, and was able dimly to discern a group of his enemies seated round the blazing fire. Drifts of their conversation came to him.

"It's a good job that you didn't finish him, Bunny, because 'The Priest' will probably want to do that job himself."

The words made Stanford think. So "The Priest" had declared himself the self-appointed executioner!

"The Priest!" Well, crooks gave themselves all kinds of fancy names, and—— Then he remembered: his caller that morning had been a priest. Was it possible that, under that guileless exterior, the man who called himself the Rev. Oswald T. Pepper harboured wolfish tendencies? He decided instantly that it was quite possible.

Grimly he realised that it was all working to plan. So confident had the Pepper person been about encompassing his end that he had actually dropped what amounted to a death notice on to the carpet. Yes, that quotation from Holy Writ *had* been a promise as well as a threat; a distinctly original type of mind, Pepper's. Why hadn't Sir Harker Bellamy told him about this new species of criminal?

"The Mole" must have had some data about him in his office.

Meanwhile, the members of the gang continued to talk. After what sounded like a half-protest from Half-Ear, the first speaker continued on his way.

His luscious praises of "The Priest" sounded dirge-like to at least one listener.

"I tell you boys, that guy's a knock-out," Stanford heard him say. "I've worked with 'The Priest' since he ran that house in Greek Street—that's a good time back now—and also when he fixed up the place in Highgate. My Gawd, what a 'Hideaway.' A battalion of soldiers couldn't have got in there. A bit of cruel luck it was, the narks findin' that out—made the boss 'op out of the country quick an' stay out."

"I wonder he ever had the nerve to come back," put in a second voice.

"Nerve?" expostulated the hero-worshipper. "That fellow don't know what fear is. Just imagine what he's pulling off to-night. Goes to this conference thing of Secret Service agents from all over Europe——"

"You're shooting off your lip too much," replied the first voice, and after that Myles was unable to hear any more.

But he had gained sufficient information. Everything was daylight-clear to him now. This master-crook, disguised as a clergyman in mufti, had called on him for the express purpose of studying his speech, mannerisms, gait and general appearance. Equipped with this knowledge, he had probably impersonated

him at the conference. . . . Myles pulled his racing thoughts up short. What a nerve! What a colossal cheek the fellow must have, to imagine that he could deceive an old-timer like "The Mole"!

Yet, without a doubt, that was what he had attempted to do. Could he possibly have got away with it?

And Naomi? She would know. "The Priest" wouldn't have been able to kid her. Why, bless her, she had been looking forward to seeing him—at least, she had said so over the phone—for days! And when——

The gangsters' voices broke out again.

"You're talking a hell of a lot about that house in Highgate," exclaimed a harshly inclined critic. "But personally, I never want to find a better lay-out than this. It's got its points."

A general laugh followed the remark, and when the merriment had died down a statement that caused Stanford to do some further speculating was made.

"I pity any blasted 'tec that runs across Laura in the dark," jeered another voice—and by the sneer in it the listener knew the speaker to be his amiable old friend, Half-Ear.

"The boss ought to be here now," the same voice continued.

"How's the jaw now, Bunny?"

A general laugh followed, but this was hushed as the sound of a car being driven up to the front door was heard.

As he tugged at his bonds, Myles felt sweat breaking out all over his body. He'd have to

get free ; he must get free. So much depended on it.

The sight which he was able to glimpse through a crack in the woodwork a few moments later sent his heart leaping into his throat. A man wearing the same type of costume as he had donned with so much misgiving himself that night, entered the huge underground room, to be greeted vociferously by his satellites.

It was not, however, the visit of this man alone that made the watcher see red. Behind the bogus Mephistopheles came a burly ruffian —carrying in his arms the limp body of a girl.

Naomi Trentham . . .

" The Priest " looked round and smiled.

" Well, boys," he said, " here I am—lucky to be back, but the main thing is that I *am* back. And I've brought with me, as you can see, a charming souvenir of the occasion. Benito had the bad manners to put a revolver bullet into her shoulder, but the wound isn't serious, and she will soon revive."

Half-Ear loped forward.

" Who is she, boss ? " he asked.

The man attired as Mephistopheles raised his eyebrows.

" Sometimes, Bunny," he retorted, " I am almost inclined to think that curiosity is the most acute of your many faults. Indeed, you are so keen on information that I am certain your inquisitiveness will one day lead you into serious trouble."

Whilst the others gathered round laughing, the man he was mocking put in a protest.

"Cut out the long words, boss, and tell us who she is. We've got a right to know, 'aven't we?"

"The Priest" considered the proposition.

"Yes," he said at length, "I suppose you have. Well, boys, this young lady—put her in that chair, Benito," he said, breaking off—"is quite a personage. She is, in fact, the niece of Lord Poynder, the British Foreign Secretary. She had keener wits than the others in Clarges Square, and, apart from her intelligence, she possesses also resolution," he continued; "so much resolution, in fact, that she had the temerity to follow me here. All the way from London—quite a drive."

"Did she come alone?" put in one of the gang.

"Quite alone. No doubt her zeal was actuated by the affection she is said to bear for our other young friend, Stanford. By the way, where is that gentleman? Bunny——?"

Half-Ear denied the impeachment.

"He's in there," he stated, pointing to a huge cupboard.

"Not——?"

"He was still breathing when I looked at him last," was the reluctant response.

"Well, fetch him out. I'd rather like a look at him. And cut his bonds."

A murmur of surprise rose from the group.

"You heard what I said," persisted their superior. "Set his hands free. An idea has just come to me."

Myles decided that the man must be crazy; for surely only a madman could seriously put forward such a proposition.

But the fellow certainly seemed serious enough.

"We have here," he continued, "a situation which appeals to my sense of the picturesque and the dramatic. From information which I have been able to gather, you and this young lady—a very attractive young lady, I may add—are in love with each other. This means that you would be prepared, as a chivalrous Englishman, not to mention a British Secret Service agent with a reputation for valorous conduct, to risk dying in her service—well," with a malicious smile, "so you shall." He paused for a moment before continuing:

"Have you ever been to Rio de Janeiro, my dear Stanford?" he continued. "If not, you should take the first opportunity of doing so. Rio is a very wonderful city. It was there that I saw two sailors fight a duel to the death over a cabaret dancing-girl. She wasn't worth the fuss, in my opinion—her ankles, to begin with, were deplorable—but the main thing, and this is my point, was that these rivals were prepared to risk death itself in her fair service. Adopting the idea, I now propose that you and a selected champion from the ranks of my rogues' company"—here he motioned towards the group of criminals standing by the fire-place—"shall fight a duel to decide the fate of the charming Miss Naomi Trentham."

"You're mad, you swine!" The hot words

shot from Stanford's lips before he realised what he was saying.

The man who might have been his double raised a hand in mild protest.

"Tut, tut!" he replied. "Let's have no harsh words, please. Such language is so crude—it reminds me of the dialogue in some of those impossible detective stories, when the long-suffering hero addresses the villain chief.

"If you only considered the situation for a moment, my dear Stanford," he went on, "I feel certain that you would be grateful for my showing you such leniency. It is in the interests of everyone in this room that you should be put away without any further fuss. That would have been your fate but for one small action on your part. I cannot forget that when, in the capacity of the British Secretary of the International Waifs and Strays Society, I called on you this morning, you were sportsman enough to hand me a cheque for five guineas. Surely," the speaker flung at him, "you are not going to confess yourself afraid to fight?"

It was an unbearable taunt, and Stanford replied to it without hesitation.

"I'll fight you or anybody else," he said.

"Excellent! You will now strip to the waist and a knife will be handed to you."

"A knife?"

"You surely did not think that fists would provide sufficient excitement?" replied "The Priest." "No, I intend to follow out the rules of the duello in every particular: you and your former adversary, Bunny here, will

fight with knives. You will fight till one of you is—well, no longer able to defend himself. In other words, to the death."

Stanford heard the words in a kind of trance. The fellow was mad, of course—and what could one do with a lunatic? No matter how nightmarish this preposterous situation was, he would have to go through with it.

But there was one thing to be settled first.

"Suppose I win?" he questioned.

"Suppose you do: then, of course, you will be free to enjoy your very charming spoils," pointing to the prone figure of Naomi, leaning back in a big easy chair. "As for her wound, that, I can assure you, is trifling. Amongst the other scraps of knowledge that I have picked up in a somewhat adventurous life is a certain amount of medical skill. It was the shock that caused her to faint, but I can assure you, Stanford, there is no real cause for alarm. But now," he went on briskly, "we have used up time. I confess I am impatient for the fun to start."

Fun!

Fun, to fight for one's life, countering every mean trick that could be conceived, with the ransom of the girl one loved at stake! And what guarantee did he have that, even if he came out the victor, this madman would play fair?

He had to know about that.

"Will you give me your word that if I win we shall both be allowed to get away?"

The evil eyes of the man narrowed.

"That is scarcely a gentlemanly thing to

say, my dear Stanford. You must leave it to my honour, I am afraid. Once, let me remind you, I belonged to your own class."

"Yes, once. I want some assurance."

"I refuse to bandy any further words with you. . . . Fight!"

It had all been like some hideous phantasmagoria, the horror of the last ten minutes! Ten minutes!—it might have been ten hours! But now an end had come: he had fought, not merely the terrifying skill of his opponent, but the fear, dark and stealthy, of what would happen to Naomi should he lose. But now, with Half-Ear's throat held in his left hand, with the man's body sapped of all its strength so that he was powerless, victory was his.

He had to kill—he was supposed to kill—but he couldn't finish it. It was too sickening. From what seemed a great distance he heard the monster who presided over this devil's carnival speak to him.

"That will do, Stanford—you have won."

What sign he had given Myles did not know, but he must have made some movement, for now the whole crowd were on him. Too late he realised that he had been tricked. What chance had there ever been of such a man keeping to his word? He had merely provided amusement for a sadist and his gang.

There was no chance for him at all. All his strength was gone. It had been used up in the volcanic energy expended during the

last few minutes. But still, with the instinct of the fighter, he faced that seething mob. He dared not think of Naomi—and of what would happen to her once this hell's pack had crushed him to the floor.

"You did well, Stanford—but not quite well enough. I am afraid I must let my men have their own way with you."

He choked out some words.

"The first who gets near enough will have this in his throat." He held up the knife that was already deeply stained with blood.

"What are you waiting for?" shouted "The Priest." But, as three men leapt forward, there was the sound of a shot, followed by the noise of shattered glass—and then the whole room went dark.

CHAPTER NINE — THRUST AND COUNTER-THRUST

THE effect of that shot was dramatic. At first a tense silence settled on the room, but this was quickly broken by the voice of " The Priest " giving his orders.

" Take them upstairs—and then search the grounds. But first of all, turn on the current —they won't be able to get away, whoever they are."

" D'you think it's the police, boss ? " queried one of the gangsters.

" Whoever it is," was the crook's comment, " won't get out of the place alive. Now jump to it."

From where he lay, strapped to the bed, Myles was able to catch a glimpse now and then of Naomi's white face. Poor kid, what she had gone through ! And all through him ! Well, if the cards went his way he would still get his own back on that foul piece of work downstairs.

" My dear ! " he called.

There was no reply. She must have fainted again.

The thought burned into him like acid. It raked his nerves more than any other reflection. In comparison, what did it matter whether

"The Priest" had been successful at Poynder House that night?

Then his mind switched violently. Who had fired that shot—and what had happened to the man? Had he been found in the grounds? If so, his fate would be horrible.

A gentle tapping sound now made him look to the right. There, with the curtains drawn close across it, was what looked like a window.

"Yes?" he called.

There was no direct reply, but he heard the sound of whispering. What did this fresh mystery mean?

Ten seconds or so after this he heard the window open, and the curtain was drawn aside. A man's form could be seen climbing in. The next moment Stanford had all he could do to stop himself from yelling.

"Not yet, my boy," advised Sir Harker Bellamy. "We're by no means out of the wood. I made a grave mistake to-night—instead of bringing merely Peter Raeside with me, I should have brought at least a dozen other men. But no matter; we'll do the best we can. Ah," turning to the window, "here is Raeside. You two haven't met each other before, I believe."

Speaking as though it was an entirely orthodox proceeding to introduce two members of his staff in such circumstances, Bellamy, after going to the other bed and making a quick but efficient examination of Naomi Trentham, explained his unexpected presence in a few rapidly uttered phrases. He stated that, following on certain information which had

come to the office after Stanford had left him that day, he had instructed Peter Raeside, recently back from mid-Europe, to call at the St. James's Street flat that evening. Raeside, owing to Stanford's eagerness to get away, had been just in time to see the tail end of the bullet-proof car vanishing into The Mall. He had given chase, but, owing to the recklessness of the luxuriously-eared driver, he had lost his quarry. Telephoning this fact back to Sir Harker Bellamy at Poynder House, he had been instructed to proceed to the suspicious-looking derelict mansion in Essex which, under his superior's orders, he had been watching since his return to London. It had been Bellamy's idea that this place might provide a suitable head-quarters for "The Priest" should he ever return to England.

"And in that respect at least I have been proved right," continued the Chief of Q.1.

"But how did you get here yourself, sir?" asked Stanford, feeling a new man now that the ropes binding him had been cut.

"That's not difficult to answer, my boy. When Lord Poynder showed me the note that this young lady," pointing to Naomi, who had recovered consciousness by this time, "had left, before embarking on that somewhat stupidly hazardous exploit of hers this evening, I put two and two together and made four of them. But the mistake I made," he repeated, shaking his head, "was not bringing more help. I am afraid my personal vanity is responsible for that error: I wanted to tackle 'The Priest' single-handed. . . ." He broke off quickly.

"But what am I doing, wasting time talking here, when my obvious duty is to get all of us safely away? How is that ladder, Raeside?" turning to the good-looking young man who was standing by awaiting orders.

"It would stand a ton weight—that little old silk ladder of mine, sir," he said promptly. "If ever you give me the push, I shall think of setting up business as a cat-burglar, and believe me, I shall not do so badly."

One more statement Bellamy permitted himself before turning to the window for the last time.

"An ingenious devil, this Priest," he said. "He got away from that conference-room by throwing a bomb to the floor filled with some stinking stuff that, blinding our eyes and filling our lungs with smoke, laid out half the company. And now to business."

Crouched against the wall, the escaped prisoners heard the loud cursings of the men in the room above. Rising high above these was a far more sinister sound—the snarling cries of an animal that evidently had just been released.

The window above them was thrust open. A man's head appeared.

"Laura!" it called, and again: "Laura!"

Out of the murky gloom a gigantic shape of some kind showed itself.

"Good God!" Stanford heard Peter Raeside say. "What are we going to do now? If we shoot that brute they will hear us."

Bellamy pointed to the left. A small stretch of woodland offered them what might be a safer harbourage.

"This way," he said, and led the party, which kept in the shadow afforded by the wall of the mansion.

The four fugitives crouched in the undergrowth. What with the physical toil of the past ten minutes, combined with the intense mental strain, they all felt spent. Naomi lay back in her lover's arms, her face twitching.

"It's all right, dear—don't worry." But the meant-to-be-soothing words sounded false even in Stanford's own ears. He knew that they were up against a danger that threatened to overwhelm them. Even the usually imperturbable Bellamy was feeling the effects of the ordeal.

"My God!" he suddenly exclaimed. "Look at that!"

Twenty yards or so to the right of them was the high brick wall surrounding the grounds of the mansion. A man's figure could be seen clambering up this. A flash of lightning showed him momentarily silhouetted against the sky. Then a terrible cry rent the stillness of the night—and the figure fell backwards like a doll tossed aside by a careless child. It fell with a thud to the earth—and remained still.

"Electrocuted—the old *cheveaux de frise* device! Well, we shan't get out that way."

"Do you mean to say, sir," put in Myles, "that the wall top has been electrified?"

Bellamy nodded.

"We may as well face the truth, my boy. Anyone who touches the wires on the top of that wall—well," nodding gloomily, "you have seen for yourself what happened to that poor devil. No doubt he was a burglar."

No sooner had he stopped speaking than a fresh menace loomed ahead. A succession of snarls, the sound of which grew perceptibly nearer every second, advised them of the near approach of the monstrous animal they had seen when backed against the wall of the house a few minutes before.

Raeside fingered his revolver.

"We shall have to shoot it now, sir."

"Not yet," warned Bellamy; "the report would bring the whole mob on us in a couple of minutes."

Another growl near at hand—and there, standing in front of them, with its huge jowls dripping with foam, stood a creature that might have belonged to the fantastic imagination of a crazy dog-breeder. This animal looked as big as a small donkey.

"Boarhound crossed with a St. Bernard," Stanford heard Bellamy mutter—and with that he loosed the girl gently from his arms.

"What are you going to do?" stammered Naomi, her face distorted with fear.

Stanford did not reply. What was the use of talking? But from the lower part of the fantastic costume he still wore he drew a long-bladed knife.

"Lucky for us they didn't take this away from me when they bundled us up into that attic," he said.

The next moment, before either of them could stop him, he had advanced towards the snarling brute.

Sir Harker Bellamy clapped a hand over the mouth of Naomi and thus stopped the shriek that rose to her lips, for what she saw made her whole body shake with terror. As the creature sprang at the human who was so evidently an enemy, there was a flash of steel, and then two bodies—one of a man, the other of a monstrous dog—rolled over and over. . . .

The man was the one to rise.

"Clean through the heart, I think, sir," he announced, and pointed to the still form, from which blood was welling in a great flood. . . .

The speaker shivered in spite of the resolution he had put on himself. After all, there was a limit to human endurance. And yet, what he had done so far was, in comparison, a mere nothing to what remained.

He drew Bellamy quickly to one side.

"You see that tree, sir?" he said, pointing to the great oak that stood a few feet away from the wall. "If I could only get on that big branch——"

"You'd kill yourself," replied Bellamy; "you could never do it."

"I'm going to try, sir, nevertheless. It's our only chance—so we won't argue about it. Years ago I used to be quite a fair long-distance jumper—and I never had so much to jump for as now."

"It's madness," said Bellamy again.

"Leave it to me, sir—and look after Naomi. If I can once get clear I'll ring up the police—I'll get anyone who will come along."

CHAPTER TEN — A LEAP FOR LIFE

MYLES, his heart beating wildly, crouched for the spring that was literally a leap for life—or death. Balancing himself on the broad limb of the great tree, he saw in mental retrospect many years of his existence pass by in a flash. He was back at Repington, a youth of eighteen, competing—and breaking a record—in the long jump competition.

But that had been sport; this was grim earnest. He had to clear what seemed, in that precarious light, a prodigious distance—six feet at least—with no take-off. And if he failed to clear the obstacle, an awful death—not only for himself, but for the girl he loved and two faithful comrades—would be the result.

Yet what was he waiting for? Every second was valuable. Tensing himself, he shut his eyes and threw his body forward. In mid-air some vital, unsuspected force seemed to give him an added strength: he remembered nothing more until he felt the breath being crushed out of his body as he landed on something hard. . . .

He had cleared the fortified wall! He had jumped clear of the spiked top that was impregnated with death.

The realisation made him remain still for a few seconds. He was in a kind of dream state;

he still could not realise all that had happened. Then a sensation of pain made him rise gingerly to his feet. Had he broken anything? But, beyond an acute throb in his right ankle, he seemed all right.

He must get away. Once again he reminded himself that there was not a second to be lost. He had had no word with Naomi, but from what Sir Harker Bellamy had said in the upstairs room it was obvious that she had followed "The Priest's" car in her own two-seater. Where was that now? Somewhere in the long drive that led from the country lane to the entrance of the house? If so, he must find it.

Caution was necessary, however—caution and speed. Summoning all his remaining resolution, he turned to the left and, keeping in the shelter of the wall, he found himself, after another few minutes, on the right hand side of the derelict drive.

What was happening behind? Had "The Priest" and his satellites rounded up Bellamy and his little party yet, and, if so, what fresh outrage was being committed on them?

He must hurry.

Crouched low, he reached the bend. His heart gave a fierce leap for joy as he noticed, drawn up by the side of the drive, a two-seater sports model car that he immediately recognised as belonging to Naomi Trentham.

Salvation! Unless the crooks had done something to the engine, he would be able to get away, find the nearest telephone and speak to Sir Harold Lellant, Assistant Commissioner of Metropolitan Police, who, a zealot at his job,

often remained late working in his private room at Scotland Yard.

Had the circumstances been different, he might have smiled at the situation that had arisen. It was only a few days before that he had been present at an amusingly acrimonious discussion between the Assistant Commissioner and Sir Harker Bellamy. This animated if friendly talk had taken place in a famous St. James's Street Club. The point at issue had been the relative value of the police and the British Secret Service. Lellant on his side had maintained that, so far as crime in England was concerned, the very able body of men under his control did more practical good in one day than the whole of the Secret Service, including Q.1, the branch which Sir Harker Bellamy controlled, were able to accomplish in a month.

"You fellows," concluded Lellant with an ironic smile, "may be more picturesque, but when it comes to finding the crooks and rounding them up, then I'll back Scotland Yard every time."

The retort of "The Mole" had been brief but vitriolic. If Stanford had not known how very deep was the friendship between these two, he might have been alarmed; but although the argument raged for at least another half-hour, with the temperature increasing every minute, the belligerents had clinked their glasses at the end and toasted each other with a warmth that left no doubt concerning their real feelings in the matter. Each was proud (and jealous) of his own reputation, which was exactly the reason why the discussion had started in the

first place; but when, a little later, the two left the club, with Stanford striding behind, they walked down the steps into St. James's Street arm in arm. No, Lellant would not fail his old friend.

But, in the meantime, he had to find a telephone. What was more, he had to get away without arousing the suspicion of the people in the house. A revolver shot might put an end to all his plans. Yet, as he turned the car and drove away from that house of hidden death, no sound came to him. With a heartfelt sense of gratitude, he realised how amazingly fortunate he had been.

There was a grating, rasping sound, and a window shot up. An apparition appeared. If he had not seen it with his own eyes, Myles could not have believed it possible—here, in this year of grace, was someone actually wearing a nightcap!

The voice that belonged to the owner of this relic of Victorianism sounded as though its owner was suffering.

"What do you mean by it, Jim Jones?" he demanded in a cracked tone. "Coming here in the middle of the night and throwing things up at my windy! Let me tell you once and for all that our Lily don't want anything more to do with you."

In spite of his anxiety, Stanford had to smile. He had been mistaken for many things in his adventurous life, but never for a modern troubadour, love-sick after the girl of his heart.

" I beg your pardon, sir," he replied, " but I am not Jim Jones. I want to use your telephone—and it's a matter of life and death. Please come down at once."

The suggestion was greeted with a snort.

" A likely story—' matter of life and death ' ! What next, I wonder ? More likely you want to rob my till. Get away with you now, or I'll call the police."

Stanford's momentary sense of amusement vanished even more quickly than it had come.

" Listen, you old fool ! " he stormed. " What I'm telling you is the truth—some friends of mine are being murdered, and I want to telephone to Scotland Yard straight away. If you don't come down I'll break in the front door."

He was sorry to have to frighten the old boy, but this was a case of desperate necessity.

" Is that right, what you're telling me, young man ? "

" COME DOWN ! " Stanford ordered.

The air in that telephone box smelt of many things—but the scent of mixed pickles scored the victory. A fine, confused odour it was, rich with the gathered accumulation of a village grocer's shop. In order to make the best possible use of the space available, the telephone box was piled high with the products necessary to the provision-man. Barking his shin on a tin biscuit box, Myles seized the instrument and said quickly :

" Hallo ! "

A voice behind him—the voice of the aged

grocer, shivering in his night-shirt and night-cap—broke in.

"It ain't no good your getting angry, young man—you've got to put your tuppence in first, otherwise they won't listen to you—no, not even if it was daylight they wouldn't. And for God's sake, what you got on your feet?"

It was only then that Stanford became aware that the man's raincoat which, by some lucky chance, Naomi had flung into her car in leaving (did her subconscious mind imagine that he would need such a covering?) only reached to his knees. Thus, although he had the garment tightly buttoned up to his neck, eighteen inches or so of scarlet tights were still visible. The sight appeared to throw the beholder into a paroxysm of surprise.

"What you got on your feet and legs, young man?" he repeated. "For the Lord's sake, why do you go about in the middle of the night dressed like that?"

"Because I suffer from chilblains," was the retort Myles flung at him before catching hold of his shoulder. "Look here, I want some coppers. I haven't any money with me. I'll pay you later on. . . . Get to your till, man: don't stand staring at me like a fool. I want some money."

Looking as though he was firmly convinced by this time that he was dealing with a madman, the dispenser of currants and mixed chutney shuffled away, raised the flap of his counter, took one more look at the importunate visitor, and then opened a drawer.

"How much do you want?"

"How much does it cost to telephone to London?"

"Ninepence."

"All right—give me nine coppers, then."

Gingerly, the grocer tendered the coins, some of which were still greasy through contact with his fingers. Ramming home the two coppers necessary to establish connection with the local exchange, Myles startled the operator on duty by demanding in a fierce tone to be put through immediately to Scotland Yard, giving the Whitehall number.

It took another couple of minutes to get into touch with Police Head-quarters—and when he did so, Myles had the mortification of hearing that Sir Harold Lellant was out of London.

"Where has he gone?" he demanded.

"No one seems to know—who is that?"

"I'm speaking for Sir Harker Bellamy, Q.1 of the Secret Service."

But even that information did not bring any tidings that wholly eased the trouble at his heart. The most the speaker (who announced himself to be a detective-inspector) could bring himself to promise was that a party of officers and men should be sent straight away. It took Myles another minute to give the necessary explicit directions.

CHAPTER ELEVEN "THE PRIEST'S" REVENGE

"THANK God!" breathed Naomi.

She was referring to the assumption that Myles had safely made that daring jump and had got away in a car. The noise of the engine receded in the distance.

Bellamy, with his wider vision, pointed out an obvious flaw, however, in the proceedings.

"I don't think we must congratulate ourselves just yet, young lady," he said, "although I am sorry to put a damper on your enthusiasm. You mustn't forget that if we heard the car the others must also have done so."

"Your logic is irresistible," said a mocking voice.

There, standing in a clearing of the small wood, not ten yards away, was a figure dressed, appropriately enough, as the Devil.

"It will be silly for you to resist, Bellamy," went on "The Priest," "for by this time my men have completely surrounded the wood. And I would also add, each of you is very adequately covered. One move—and we shall be phoning up the nearest undertaker. Be sensible, and I will promise to do the best I can for you."

Whilst Raeside would have followed the example of his colleague Stanford and been willing to take any risks, Bellamy showed by

his attitude that—at least for the moment—he acknowledged defeat.

"All right, Priest—you win. As long as you treat this young lady with a reasonable amount of consideration, you can do what you like with me."

"Bravely and nobly spoken," was the comment. "Miss Trentham, I promise you, shall receive every attention at my hands."

It was a quarter of an hour later. The two enemies, Bellamy with his wrists enclosed in a pair of handcuffs, sat opposite each other across a wide table in a room that the master-criminal had furnished barely, after the style of a study.

"The Priest," very earnest now and with all traces of his former levity gone, was speaking.

"I want you to look at this matter in a sensible light, Bellamy. Every man, no matter how clever he may be, has got to acknowledge defeat at some time or other. To your credit and common sense you have done so in the present instance. Now, my proposition is this: in return for your life—it is stupid of me, perhaps, but I should regret very much if I were forced to take extreme measures, for existence without the zest of having to cross swords with you every now and again would be lacking in interest—I want certain information. Owing to an unfortunate mishap, my plans miscarried this evening at Lord Poynder's house. But that is not to say, of course, that I have failed altogether. Need I say any more?"

"What you want," returned the Secret Service Chief, "is the plans we were going to discuss at the conference, I take it?"

"The Priest" bowed.

"Admirably succinct, as usual—yes, that is what I want. No one need be any the wiser, my friend. In the ordinary way, I recognise naturally that nothing on earth would induce you to betray your trust, but the circumstances are exceptional; don't forget that I hold here as prisoners a young man for whose welfare you are more or less responsible; while Miss Trentham . . . Well, up to now I have been successful in holding my men in check, but I cannot say how much longer her really ravishing beauty will keep her safe."

"In spite of your promise?"

"In spite of my promise. Remember, I am only one man against a crowd. But before we go any further," he continued, "I think I should warn you that any information you may pass to me must be absolutely reliable. It is only on those terms that I consent to bargain. I put you on your honour, Sir Harker."

Bellamy appeared to reflect. It was true that his enemy held the master cards—and that he would play them without scruple within a very short space of time. The only chance was that Stanford had been able to establish connection with the outside world.

It was as though "The Priest" was able to read his thoughts.

"If you are counting on any help from the young man who got away in such a sensational manner, I would suggest in all seriousness that

you dismiss the thought from your mind. This house is very well equipped for attack; I have only to press that switch"—pointing across the room—"for the whole of the drive to be blown sky-high; and with the debris, needless to say, will be the body of any rash intruder. In short, my dear Bellamy, I am prepared for any emergency, and I have merely to lift this telephone receiver"—pointing to the instrument on the desk—"to ensure that at least two of my hostages . . ." He broke off to smile. "You're a sensible man, Bellamy, as well as a brilliant person at your job, but, as I said before, everyone, no matter how gifted, is bound to accept defeat at some time or other. In the three encounters we have had together, you have scored twice—but in the present instance I am fully able to pay back all scores."

For the second time the Secret Service Chief appeared to sink himself in reverie. Although he knew that "The Priest" was not bluffing—that every word, in fact, must be true—yet he still had to play for time. The position seemed hopeless, it was true; but he had been in equally desperate straits before this and had come out victorious. But from what direction success was to arrive in this case he did not know.

"What exactly do you want me to tell you?" he queried.

"The Priest," opening a drawer, took out pencil and paper.

"I propose to put to you certain questions—and I want truthful answers."

"I must think." Bellamy rose from the

table and commenced to walk up and down the floor. "I realise the tremendous responsibility that rests on me," he added seriously. "I have to think of the girl."

"Of course. The sentiment does you credit, my dear Sir Harker."

"The Priest" had also risen and was now walking towards his prisoner. The latter suddenly turned and, lifting his manacled hands, would have brought them down on the head of his enemy, had not "The Priest" suddenly become suspicious. With an agility that was surprising in a man of his age, he flung himself forward, gripped the Secret Service Chief round his legs and brought him with terrific force to the oak floor.

"That is how I scotch snakes," he commented grimly, a moment later raising his voice to call: "Bunny!"

The speaker's face was venomous with rage.

"You are called, I understand, 'The Mole,'" he said. "Very well, you shall have a chance of living up to your nickname. A mole burrows underground, I believe—you shall be buried alive. As for Raeside and the girl—you can leave me to deal with them."

Meanwhile, Myles Stanford was rushing back in the direction he had come. Having given the detective-inspector at Scotland Yard the most minute instructions how to get to the place, he realised he must also be on the spot.

Anxiety was driving him almost mad; he must ascertain what had happened to Naomi.

Stopping the car in the lane outside the drive, he proceeded to prospect. Caution told him that it would be suicidal to approach the house by means of the drive, whilst death awaited him if he attempted to climb the high wall.

After ten minutes' search, luck was with him: he was able to find a portion of the wall that, owing to neglect, had fallen into disrepair. By means of working feverishly he was able to pick out a number of bricks, and thus manage to make a hole large enough for him to crawl through.

Now that he was in the enemy's country again, he knew that he would have to use the greatest care. The patch of woodland was his objective. Crawling on his stomach, he drew sufficiently near a group of men to be able to discover what they were doing.

They were digging a grave!

For whom?

He was not left long in doubt. It was the voice of "The Priest" that he heard giving his final instructions.

"You will bury him completely," he heard the man say.

With a clutch of horror at his heart, he now noticed a prone figure lying on the ground. By its shape he knew it to be his Chief, Sir Harker Bellamy.

What could he do? He was unarmed—he had left the knife with which he had killed the dog Laura with Raeside before starting on that hazardous attempt to get help—and he was one

against a crowd. Yet it was impossible for him to remain inactive ; he must do something.

Was Bellamy dead ? Apparently not, otherwise he would not have been bound. Then that fiend, "The Priest," intended to bury him alive !

At the thought, all idea of common sense left him ; getting to his feet, he dashed ahead.

"The Priest" was the first to turn. As he caught sight of the wild-eyed figure who was leaping to attack him, he swerved aside, flicked his fingers, and the three men who had been digging the grave flung themselves on the intruder.

The fight which ensued was short, if bitter. Weakened as he was by his previous exertions, Stanford had no chance against such heavy odds. As he lapsed into unconsciousness, he heard "The Priest" say :

"There ought to be room for both—they can keep each other company."

CHAPTER TWELVE — THE UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

BUT before the grave-diggers could resume their hideous toil, there came another interruption. A man whom "The Priest" recognised as Krieg, the trusted emissary of Kuhnreich, the Dictator of Ronstadt, strode forward out of the darkness.

"What nonsense is this?" he demanded in a harsh tone, and before "The Priest" could make any response he continued: "I want to see you—we'll go back to the house. In the meantime, enough trouble has been caused already. Release those men."

"The Priest," surprised as he was, was not inclined to give ground.

"You realise who they are, I suppose?" he asked. "One is Sir Harker Bellamy and the other is his chief lieutenant. They forced themselves in here to-night and they must pay the penalty."

The eyes of the other man gleamed with anger.

"You heard what I said; release them at once. I will decide later what is to be done with them, but in the meantime I want to talk to you."

Without waiting for any further argument, he turned on his heel and walked towards the house.

* * * * *

There was no doubt about it: Krieg was angry. With his felt hat pulled well down over his eyes, he walked up and down the room, his hands hidden in the pockets of his overcoat. His words were like so many words fired from a machine-gun.

"I came here because of an imperious message from Kuhnreich," he stated. "He is furious at your failure to-night. You talk a lot—but you have done nothing. I am instructed to tell you that."

"The Priest," sitting, apparently at his ease, in a comfortable chair, lit a cigarette. No one could have told from his expression the effect of the visitor's words.

"In that case," he retorted, "I suggest that he finds someone else to do his dirty work. I have finished."

"Are you serious?" demanded the other.

"The Priest" blew a cloud of smoke.

"I was never more serious in my life. And so this is my reward. I showed myself able to face something which would have appalled anyone else—including yourself—and you come here to insult me. Perhaps you do not realise the exact position, Krieg. The men in this house work for me; they will do anything I want them to do—so I suggest that you control your tongue."

It was not an idle threat and the visitor knew it. There was very grave danger in his maintaining his present attitude.

"I do not speak for myself—I am speaking for Kuhnreich," he returned. "If I had not delivered the message, it would have been so much the worse for me. You appreciate that, of course?"

"The Priest" stood his ground.

"I appreciate that you have spoken to me as no other living person would have dared to do—yes, I admit I have failed to-night, but it was the unexpected which defeated me. In fact, I was fortunate to get away from Poynder House alive. And," he went on, his voice rising, "if I did not succeed there I shall succeed here. Bellamy, the man who knows all the secrets of the British Intelligence and the Foreign Office, is in my hands. He has not spoken yet—but I am still hoping. . . . And if he does not speak, there is still Stanford. He does not know as much as Bellamy—but even the information which he will be able to pass to us would be valuable, without a doubt."

Krieg shook his head.

"You are wrong—neither of them will speak."

The other swore a tremendous oath.

"I will make them."

But Krieg again shook his head.

"It would be hopeless," he said. "I have heard of Bellamy—he is the finest type of English Intelligence man. My time is short," he went on, his attitude becoming that of the accuser again, "and it is imperative that we should understand each other perfectly. Kuhnreich has asked me to accept your resignation."

"The Priest" sprang from his chair.

"That's a lie—he wouldn't dare do it. I know too much about him."

"You threaten us?" cried the visitor.

"The Priest" flung away his cigarette.

"I want to see it in writing," he retorted.

"Do you think a thing like that could be

put in writing? Kuhnreich added that he considered you were a bungler and that he did not pay big money to have important matters bungled. I want to know the result of that conference to-night."

"Then, by God, you shall!" cried the other hotly.

He went to the fire-place and rang the bell.

"Bring the prisoners in—all of them," he ordered.

"Your methods are all wrong, I am afraid," said Krieg. "I will speak to Sir Harker Bellamy myself."

Drawing up a chair, he sat opposite the chief prisoner.

"My name is Krieg," he started. "You have probably heard of me."

Bellamy stared.

"Yes, I have heard of you," he replied, without moving a muscle of his face. "In fact, I hope you will give me the pleasure of visiting my office one day. You will find there a complete dossier of your spying activities in this country."

The other laughed.

"All that I have heard about you, Bellamy, would appear to be true," he said. "But I have no time to waste now. On the other side of the water is someone who is very desirous of knowing what was discussed at the conference of Allied Powers at Poynder House to-night. I understand that this gentleman," motioning to "The Priest," "has failed so far in gaining any information from you on the point—but I

have more confidence in my own methods. You realise, of course, that you are in a very delicate position here?" As he said the words, the speaker gave the bound man a look full of significance.

Bellamy seemed impressed.

"I will tell you all I know," he said. "We made that paid snake of yours who calls himself 'The Priest' look the biggest fool——"

The man referred to stepped forward; his face was livid with rage.

"This farce has gone on long enough," he said; "I won't have any more of it."

Krieg rose and faced him.

"Please understand, I am here to give you orders," he stated.

The man he addressed glared back at him.

"Which I shall refuse to obey."

Whilst the two stood glaring at each other, one of "The Priest's" gang rushed in.

"Boss," he cried, "the drive's full of cars."

Myles Stanford said his little piece.

"I expect it's the police," he stated. "I telephoned to Scotland Yard about three-quarters of an hour ago. They ought to be here by this time."

"The Priest" laughed.

"You say I am a failure, Krieg?" he shouted. "But I'll show you. . . ." For a moment he became incoherent with rage. Then, pointing across the room, he said: "By touching a switch concealed in that wall, I can blow them all to hell. The drive is mined. Do you want to see a pretty sight? Then go outside and watch."

Krieg shook his head. It had apparently become a habit.

"It's too dangerous—I won't allow it. Why, we should have every policeman in England about our ears. No "—and he stepped forward.

"Out of my way."

"You heard what I said—I won't allow it. If these men really are the police, then we must submit to being arrested. As a member of the Ronstadtian Embassy, I should claim diplomatic privilege."

"What about me ? "

"One must pay for being a failure," was the gibingly bitter reply.

Myles Stanford thought it an appropriate time to say his second little piece.

"Who should know better than the Reverend Oswald T. Pepper the truth that 'in the midst of life we are in death' ? " he asked.

"The Priest" threatened to turn berserker. He foamed at the mouth.

"I'll kill you ! " he blazed at Krieg.

But the latter remained unmoved. From his right overcoat pocket he took a revolver.

"Put your hands up—you damned swine ! " he said, and, as he said the words, Sir Harker Bellamy drawled :

"I thought you had carried the joke far enough, Lellant."

"Lellant ! " echoed "The Priest."

"Sir Harold Lellant, Assistant Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police," was the smooth reply. "Stand back—or you'll get all six of these bullets in your hide. . . . Ah ! I think my men have arrived," as the sound of rushing feet came to them from outside.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN — "THE MOLE" WRITES A CHEQUE

"It really was fairly simple," said Sir Harold Lellant, starting on his tale of explanation. "You remember, Bellamy, having that bet with me of a fiver that you would be the first to get hold of 'The Priest' if ever he returned to this country? Well, my pride was properly stung and I resolved that I'd get in before you if it were possible. Have you ever heard of a man named Blumberg?" he went on.

"The Mole" snorted.

"Of course I've heard of Blumberg—what about him?"

"Only this," replied his friendly rival. "I've been keeping my eye on Blumberg for some time, and when he did something stupid which brought him within reach of 'the grim hand of Scotland Yard' (see any fifth-rate detective novel-writer), I put up to him a little proposition. Fortunately for himself, he saw sense—oh, I admit it was very unorthodox, but then, you've never paid much heed to orthodoxy yourself, have you, so far as I can recall. The result was that when I called at this house to-night—Blumberg was good enough to give me the address—I presented myself as Hermann Krieg, the trusted confidant and emissary of Kuhnreich, the Dictator of Ronstadt. It is a tribute, I think, to Blumberg's efficiency as a

disguising agent that our mutual enemy, 'The Priest,' never had any suspicion. Of course, to be fair to him, the light in this room was very bad—but the one thing I was afraid of, namely, my voice, seemingly passed me through."

Bellamy applied a little cold water.

"You musn't forget that he was in a raging temper—otherwise you wouldn't have pulled it off. I myself saw through the trick directly you came into the room."

Lellant howled with laughter.

"You did? How?"

"By the hitch you always give to your trousers every few minutes or so. You should watch out for that—it gives you away every time."

"Well, anyhow," summed up the Assistant Commissioner, "I think I've won my fiver. I wasn't forgetting how you did a neat job of work by posing as that Soho doctor fellow,* and I must say it gives me quite a kick to know that I was able to pull off something of the same sort."

"My dear old chap," replied Bellamy warmly, all sense of rancour gone, "if you hadn't popped along we should all have been in hell by this time. And now I must go and reassure Miss Trentham."

"And I must see to my prisoners," stated the Scotland Yard official.

Downstairs in the big hall the prisoners had been gathered together. They made a tough-looking crowd. Standing apart was their leader,

* See "The House in Greek Street."

"The Priest." Although all his plans had gone awry, although he knew that this time there could be no possible hope for him, he looked as proud as a fallen Lucifer. He eyed the man who had tricked him with open scorn.

But curiosity conquered every other feeling.

"Blumberg?" he asked.

"Blumberg," replied Lellant, nodding.

The other swore softly.

"He always was a fool—when away from business. . . . I suppose I can smoke?"

Lellant looked at him shrewdly.

"Yes—but have one of mine," He held his case open.

"The Priest," shrugging, brought the cigarette awkwardly to his lips with his manacled hands.

"That was scarcely sporting of you, Lellant," he commented.

"You're too valuable to be allowed to commit suicide," was the crisp reply. "All ready, boys?"

"All ready, sir."

"Then we'll get off."

Lord Poynder sank lower into his easy chair, his abnormally long legs looking like the antennæ of some undefined creature of the spider variety.

"So Scotland Yard beat you to it, young man?" he gently scoffed. "I must say I am surprised at you, too, Bellamy," turning to the Chief of Q.I.

"The Mole" took the gibe in good part.

"What on earth does it matter who gets the runs as long as the side wins?" he replied. "And, in any case, I didn't come here to-night to listen to a catalogue of my faults from even the Foreign Secretary." Having said so much, he continued bluntly: "You may not be aware of the fact, but these young people," motioning to the left of him, "are very much attracted to each other—a fact which I should think had been amply demonstrated by this time even to——"

The scissors-like legs were drawn up. Lord Poynder rose (by sections) from his chair. When he had gained his full height of six feet three inches, he looked down at the comparatively diminutive figure of "The Mole."

"Are you trying to insult me, Bellamy?" he asked.

"Not on your life, sir; I'm challenging you to a game of snooker pool."

"What stakes?"

"I'll go up to a penny a ball—but I'm not being robbed of anything higher than that."

"Very well." Lord Poynder started to shamble to the door on the opposite side of the room.

"And we shan't require a marker," said Bellamy loudly.

It was ninety minutes later. The two antagonists of the billiards table had returned. One was flushed. Lord Poynder was human enough to enjoy his victory.

After stating proudly that he had won the

huge sum of six and eightpence from his adversary, he allowed himself to think of the affairs of others.

"What's that I heard Bellamy say about you two being fond of each other?" he asked.

Myles Stanford spoke him good and fair.

"It's perfectly true, sir—I want to marry Naomi."

Lord Poynder chuckled.

Kissed her yet?"

Er—several times, sir."

Is that true, Naomi?"

I'm afraid it is, Uncle."

Shameless! . . . Well, what do you want for a wedding present?"

This time it was Sir Harker Bellamy who delivered the thrust.

"I suggest that set of snooker balls," he said. "I believe they're faked, anyhow."

THE CLEAN WINEGLASS

THE CLEAN WINEGLASS

"The fact which stares you in the face is not always of much use in crime."

AFTER looking through the many interesting records which my friend, Sebastian Quin the crime investigator, has so kindly placed at my disposal, I have decided to make a start with the perplexing murder mystery, the notes of which Quin tabulated under the heading of "The Clean Wineglass." It was that wineglass which nearly sent an innocent man to the gallows; which is the reason, no doubt, why Quin, whose mind always riveted itself on the one essential fact in every case in which he was engaged, chose the above title. I have one other reason for selecting this as the first of a series of papers on modern crime because I had the privilege of being with the famous investigator throughout the short time it took him to clear up a crime that startled the world by its ingenious cunning.

The best description I can give of Sebastian Quin is that he was an enthusiast of the bizarre, and an analyst of crime in its most weird and freakish manifestations. A man of comfortable means, he devoted his time to the dissecting of criminals' minds. His reputation was not merely European, but world-wide; men and women came to consult him from the ends of the earth. His friendship was the greatest

honour that any man could have, and I counted myself singularly fortunate in being allowed to share his confidence.

On the night that this story may be said to have opened, Quin and I had been to a dinner of the Friday Club at Viviani's, that justly celebrated Regent Street restaurant. The Friday Club, whose members consisted mostly of doctors and scientists, met on the first Friday in every month for the purpose of discussing interesting matters appertaining to crime and medical jurisprudence. Some of the subjects chosen were startling, which was the reason why anyone connected with the popular press was always strictly excluded. If some of the speeches made at the meetings of the Friday Club had ever got into the more sensationally inclined newspapers . . .

It had been a most mentally stimulating evening for me, one reason being that I had been seated next to a Professor Broomshaw, whose conversation had proved brilliant in the extreme.

Walking home I asked Sebastian Quin what he knew about this man. The reply was short.

"A fellow of wonderful attainments, I understand."

"I should imagine so—he was the most fascinating conversationalist I think I have ever met," I replied.

By this time we had reached one of those quiet streets lying at the back of the Albert Hall. Outside a house Quin stopped.

" Since you evidently have a liking for men who can talk so well," observed my companion, somewhat sardonically it struck me at the time, " I want to introduce you to another member of the Friday Club. Sir Oliver Dilke wasn't at the dinner to-night on account of a bad cold, but as he is always a latish bird, I do not think he will have gone to bed. We'll go in."

Then a startling thing occurred.

From the door outside of which we were standing, a servant came rushing like a man whom fear had driven mad.

Quin seized his arm.

" Matthews ! " he said peremptorily. " What is the matter ? "

The butler stared uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then he appeared to recognise my companion.

" Matter, Mr. Quin," he stammered, " matter enough, Heaven knows ! Sir Oliver—" he choked. " Sir Oliver's dead ! " he said.

The slight figure of Quin stiffened.

" Dead ? " he exclaimed. " When ? "

" Just now, sir. I went into the library to wish Sir Oliver good night, and to say that I had locked up—that was my rule, Mr. Quin—and when I got into the room——" He stopped for a moment to get a fresh control over himself.

" Steady yourself, man," said my companion sternly.

" It wasn't a horrible death, Mr. Quin. It was just as though he had passed away while he was reading. But there was a startled look on his face——"

" Why are you rushing out of the house like

this ? " Quin snapped the question. By his expression I knew that he was deeply stirred. A man who had died quietly in his chair, and yet had a startled look on his face . . .

" I was going to fetch a doctor—and the police, Mr. Quin. We aren't on the telephone —you know how old-fashioned Sir Oliver was in some of his ideas."

" Yes, that's true. Well, go for the police and the nearest doctor. You haven't touched the body ? "

" N-no, sir," replied the shuddering butler ; " I ran straight out, sir, after I found—him dead."

" That was very sensible of you." Sebastian Quin's humour could be grim on occasion. " You had better come with me, Huish," he said to me. " I may just have time to look round before some blundering constable arrives."

Quin evidently knew his way about the house, for he walked straight towards the room in which the dead man had been found. This library, whilst being comfortably furnished, was quite obviously the workshop of the late scientist. A cheerful fire was still burning in the grate ; there was a cosy atmosphere ; but lolling back in a study chair which had been drawn up to the library table, was—a dead man.

" Shut the door, Huish," said Quin, " and keep guard over it until I have had a look round."

Standing with my back to the library door, I looked round the room myself. From that distance it certainly appeared as though Sir

Oliver had died whilst reading—a common enough case of sudden heart failure. The startled expression which was still clearly imprinted on the handsome, austere face could easily be accounted for, I imagined—an unsuspected heart attack might well cause such a look.

Quin moved about disturbing nothing but seeing everything, I knew. I noticed him linger over three articles which were on the table besides the book. These three articles were respectively:

1. A wineglass that had evidently been drunk out of, since there was still a little red wine left at the bottom of the glass.

2. A clean wineglass.

3. A large and exquisite mounted butterfly, its wings black, and with beautifully traced white borders.

Whilst Quin was examining this fine specimen through a magnifying glass, there came a sudden knock on the door. Obviously put out, he signalled to me to open the door.

A police-constable, closely followed by a man carrying a small black bag, burst into the room.

The doctor went straight to the dead man. The constable looked inquiringly at my companion.

"My name's Quin," explained the latter; "your superiors will know it. I am an intimate friend of the dead man, and I happened to be passing when Matthews, the butler, rushed out in a panic. I advised him to fetch the police

and a doctor at once. This is my assistant, Mr. Martin Huish. Nothing has been touched."

The suspicious look on the constable's face lessened, but he said brusquely :

" I must ask you both to stay here, sir, until the inspector arrives."

" Certainly," replied Quin. " I intended to do that in any case."

By this time the doctor had completed his examination.

" Heart failure, undoubtedly," he said, coming towards us.

" You will have an autopsy, doctor ? " queried Sebastian Quin.

" The police-surgeon may decide to hold one—that will be his affair—but if he listens to me he won't waste time. Sir Oliver Dilke undoubtedly died suddenly of heart failure." The reply was brusque.

Quin made no comment beyond saying :

" I was a close friend of Sir Oliver. Naturally I am affected by his death."

" Well," conceded the medical man, changing his tone, " you have the consolation of knowing that he died painlessly."

" I am glad to be assured of that."

Then the room suddenly filled. To the foremost figure, a heavily-built man with a pugnacious jaw and a bowler hat which he had not troubled to remove, Sebastian Quin gave greeting.

" Hallo, Fordyce."

The Scotland Yard man stared.

" You here, Mr. Quin ? "

" As you can see, Inspector. Sir Oliver was

my friend, and, moreover, I happened to be calling when the butler ran out to fetch the police after making his discovery."

The Scotland Yard officer seemed to harbour some resentment at the presence of Quin, which clearly had been unexpected, but he merely nodded at my companion's reply.

He strode to the table.

"What about these wineglasses, Matthews?"

The butler's face became haggard. A look of horror showed in his eyes. I felt Quin by my side start.

"Don't ask me!" the butler answered, panic-stricken. "I suppose Sir Oliver must have taken a glass of wine—yes, I know he did. I brought it in to him—them," he corrected hastily.

The ponderous figure of the inspector planted itself squarely on the hearthrug.

"Before we go any further, Matthews," he said, "I must advise you in your own interest——"

"You don't think I had anything to do with it?" cried the butler.

"I'm not saying that you had anything to do with Sir Oliver Dilke's death," was the stolid answer. "What I'm warning you against now is not to keep back anything which has happened to-night. Now, then, whom do you mean by 'them'?"

Matthews gulped.

"Sir Oliver and his nephew, Mr. Hilary Croft," he replied slowly. "I brought wine in to them at ten o'clock to-night."

It was three o'clock in the morning, but I could not think of going to bed. So I sat and smoked Sebastian Quin's super-excellent Haymarket Mixture and listened fascinatedly to what he was saying.

"This is a highly curious affair, Huish," he summed up, pressing the tobacco down into the bowl of his pipe. "Let me, for the sake of clarity—always an important matter in a case of murder—summarise what we already know.

"At ten-thirty to-night Sir Oliver Dilke, one of the most prominent scientists in the country and a highly respected gentleman, is found dead in his study chair. Before him is an open book—Bauer's 'Butterflies'—and the presumption is that whilst perusing this work he sustained a sudden heart attack which prevented him from calling out for help and which mercifully did not last long. (You will remember we have that consequential doctor's word for it that my old friend died practically painlessly.)

"Before him on the table, besides the book, are three objects—two wineglasses, one clean the other dirty, and a mounted butterfly, a very fine specimen. After the two doctors, the civilian and the police have agreed that the cause of death was heart failure, the inspector from Scotland Yard rightly—he would have been a fool if he had not done so—makes some inquiries about the two wineglasses. For, you see, there was something very peculiar about those wineglasses—one was clean and the other was dirty. Had they both been dirty—that is to say, used—considerable significance would

still have rightly been attached to them by the inspector, but as one was clean——"

Sebastian Quin broke off with characteristic abruptness. His thin, almost cadaverous face (with his slight build, horsey style of dressing and general appearance he was often mistaken for a certain leading jockey) was slightly flushed —a sure sign that his astute mind was working at high pressure.

"Recall the evidence of the butler, Huish. What was it Matthews said? He said that he brought the wine into the library, and that Hilary Croft, the nephew of the dead man, poured out two glassfuls. Two, not one, remember. The presumption is, of course, that they both drank a glassful of wine.

"But after the dead body of Sir Oliver is discovered one glass is found to be clean.

"Inspector Fordyce was quick to jump to a conclusion, you will remember. After hearing that Sir Oliver and his nephew had been at enmity for some time, he smiled. I could read that smile—at least, I fancied I could. You must not be surprised, Huish, if you hear that Hilary Croft is arrested quite soon."

"But both doctors said that an inquest would not be necessary—that death was due to heart failure," I put in. "There's no mystery, surely?"

"On the contrary," replied Sebastian Quin, "the death of my old friend, Sir Oliver Dilke, presents a very intriguing mystery. Remember the clean wineglass, Huish."

"The suggestion is, I suppose, that Hilary Croft put poison into the glass of wine which

his uncle drank? After Sir Oliver's death, fearing to leave a trace of his guilt, he washed the glass at the tap in the library and then put it back on the table?"

"Quite sound reasoning, Huish! Although, of course, he did not say so, I am convinced that was the conclusion at which Inspector Fordyce arrived. As I have told you, I expect to hear in the morning that Hilary Croft has been arrested."

When at four o'clock the following afternoon I bought a copy of the *Mercury*, almost the first head-lines I saw were:

SCIENTIST'S NEPHEW ARRESTED.
CHARGED WITH MURDER.
HOW DID SIR OLIVER DILKE DIE?

I took a taxi at once to Sebastian Quin's house. The baffling nature of this crime into which I had been dragged had kept me awake the previous night. I looked at the photograph of Hilary Croft which the *Mercury* published, and decided that this was not the face of a murderer.

Arriving at Quin's chambers, his man told me he was engaged, but that if I called I was to go into his study at once. Entering the room, after knocking, I found myself being introduced to a remarkably attractive girl, whose beauty was now ravaged, however, by an overwhelming grief.

"This is Miss Ethel Laurie, Huish. Mr. Huish is my confidential friend," said Quin.

After I had seated myself Quin continued:

"Miss Laurie has come to me hoping that I can help Mr. Hilary Croft, to whom she is engaged to be married——"

"Oh, if you will!" pleaded the girl, clasping her hands.

"I will do my best, Miss Laurie—you can rest assured of that," replied my friend. "Personally, I do not believe he is guilty."

"That gives me hope," said the girl. "I feel now that there is still a chance for him."

Quin nodded.

"You can speak quite frankly before Mr. Huish, who is, in a way, my assistant," he said to the girl.

"I am an actress," said Miss Laurie. "I suppose that is the reason why Sir Oliver objected so strongly to my knowing Hilary. In any case, he always refused to meet me. Hilary is an artist, you know, with a studio in Chelsea. After his quarrel with his uncle over me he left Bulton Street and lived at this studio. But yesterday afternoon when he met me he said that he had made it up with his uncle, and that he was going to see Sir Oliver that night at Bulton Street—his uncle had invited him."

"You are sure of that fact, Miss Laurie?"

"Quite sure, Mr. Quin. That was the only reason Hilary went to see his uncle last night. And yet they say that he committed murder—it's abominable! Hilary would not hurt a fly. And although they had quarrelled, he really loved his uncle and admired him tremendously. He often said to me that he considered Sir Oliver was one of the greatest men of his day."

"So he was," confirmed Sebastian Quin. "I may as well tell you, Miss Laurie," he broke off in the manner he had, "that the view of the police is that Mr. Croft went to Bulton Street with the determination to murder his uncle, that he suggested Sir Oliver should drink a glass of wine with him in celebration of the reconciliation, that he poisoned the wine which his uncle drank, and that in order to destroy any trace of his crime he washed the wineglass his uncle used."

"You do not believe that, Mr. Quin?"

The lovely face was distraught.

The crime investigator took the hands which were outstretched to him, and gently squeezed them.

"Try not to worry too much, my dear," he said reassuringly.

After the girl had gone, I turned quickly to Quin.

"So they found poison?"

He nodded.

"Yes—at the autopsy. Stupidly enough, the official authorities regard me as something of an interfering busybody—except in those cases where they come for my help—and up to the present I do not know what kind of poison was found."

"Do you regard that as important? Isn't the fact that some poison was found sufficient?"

"Not when a man I believe to be innocent is faced with the gallows, Huish! But I am expecting a telephone message. Ah!" as the bell rang.

Thirty seconds later he turned to me.

"Cyanide of potassium," he said briefly. "And now, Huish, I must ask you to be good enough to leave me. I have some work to do, and I must do it alone."

The first thing I saw when I reached out for the paper the next morning was the staring head-line:

PROFESSOR BROOMSHAW FOUND SHOT.

Beneath was a short paragraph:

"Professor I. B. Broomshaw, the well-known lecturer at St. Crispin's Hospital, was found shot in his rooms at Welbeck Street last night. A revolver with one chamber discharged was lying by the side of the dead man. An inquest will be held."

Broomshaw! That was the wonderful conversationalist I had met at the Friday Club only two nights before! And now he was dead—had committed suicide, apparently! A man of brilliant attainments, according to Sebastian Quin, who knew everybody. What despair could have driven him to take his life?

The news affected me so strongly that I was unable to eat any breakfast. What a tragedy it was that so many of the finest brains should become unhinged, whilst the clods who never contributed the least to the world's progress lived such long, dull, unproductive lives!

At ten o'clock I took a taxi to Sebastian Quin's rooms. I found him sitting alone before an untasted breakfast.

"I feared this, Huish," he said when I entered, pointing to the newspaper he was reading.

"Do you mean Professor Broomshaw's death?" I asked. I had seen the head-line over his shoulder.

"Yes. But it was either that, flight or exposure. He denied it last night, but I could see that he was guilty, although my proofs were slender. Like his own, mine was a shot in the dark. But it was successful."

"What on earth are you talking about, Quin?" I demanded somewhat irritably.

"What should I be talking about" replied Quin, putting down the newspaper, "but the Dilke murder mystery?"

I became more bewildered.

"What had Professor Broomshaw to do with the death of Sir Oliver Dilke?"

"He was the murderer—that's all," answered Sebastian Quin, and permitted himself a smile at my expense.

"You're mad!" I cried, forgetting myself in the perplexity of the moment. "Broomshaw wasn't even in the house last night."

Quin pushed me back into my chair.

"Only the early hour is a sufficient excuse for such rudeness," he said, "but I am glad you have dropped in, because I've just solved the Dilke mystery."

Too amazed to make any immediate comment, I watched the crime investigator place on the table first a book, and then a large and

exquisite mounted butterfly, its wings black and with beautifully traced white borders.

"Why, that was on the table in Sir Oliver's study!" I exclaimed.

"Quite so. Also the book. And because I felt at the time that both had some connection with the mystery of the death, I took the liberty of confiscating them. It was very fortunate I did so. But if you will be quiet for a few minutes, I hope to explain everything to your satisfaction," he added.

"This is quite one of the most interesting cases I have handled for some time," resumed Quin, filling his pipe. "I must reiterate the facts. Sir Oliver Dilke, a prominent scientist, and a much beloved man, is found dead in his library one night. An open book is before him. It was a case of heart failure, the doctors said. But the autopsy proved that Sir Oliver's heart, as well as the other organs, was sound. His death was not due to natural causes, but how he was killed appeared at first a mystery. There was no wound; not even a scratch on the body. There had been no struggle. As he had sat in his chair reading, so apparently he had died.

"Yet, as I have said, the autopsy revealed that death had not been due to natural causes; it was due to poison—cyanide potassium, one of the most deadly agents known.

"The clean wineglass seemed a valuable clue. It became known that Hilary Croft, the scientist's nephew and heir, had been on terms of enmity with Sir Oliver because he had become engaged to an actress. Here was a possible motive—with Sir Oliver dead, Croft would

inherit his fortune and also be free to marry the girl to whom his uncle objected.

"But there is such a thing as a clue being too obvious. My experience has been that the fact which stares you in the face is never of much use in crime; it is not to be relied upon. Look at it this way—if Hilary Croft had really intended to poison his uncle he would not have done it in the clumsy fashion which the police allege. He would not have allowed the butler to be practically a witness to the crime—and the theory of the washed wineglass, although interesting, never appealed strongly to me. Any fool—and Hilary Croft is no fool—would have put fresh wine into the glass to divert suspicion."

"You laid stress upon the clean wineglass at the time, I remember," I said.

Quin smiled that tolerant smile which I occasionally found so irritating.

"I was exhausting the obvious before I tackled the ingenious," he said, "and after examining this"—he pointed to the exquisite mounted butterfly—"I knew that this murder had been most ingeniously planned."

"Why?"

"You must allow me to tell my story in my own way, Huish. The fact that the butterfly was on the table was conclusive evidence that Sir Oliver had recently been examining it. Now, valuable butterfly specimens, I happen to know, are sometimes given an application of cyanide to preserve them. I could not tell without analysis, but I felt at the time that it was pretty certain that this butterfly, being valuable, had been sprayed with cyanide.

" Inquiries I made from Matthews disclosed the interesting fact that a small parcel had come from Vivash's, the specimen people, by the last post on the day of the tragedy. Inquiry at Vivash's disclosed the even more interesting fact that Professor Broomshaw had called at the shop that morning and had looked out some specimens.

" He was shown this rare butterfly which had recently arrived from one of Vivash's agents in Mexico—a wonderful place for butterflies, Mexico—and was about to touch it when Vivash warned him.

" ' It's treated with cyanide—don't put your fingers to your mouth, professor,' he said.

" According to Vivash's statement to me, Broomshaw smiled at this warning. But Vivash didn't smile. He noticed that Broomshaw in handling the butterfly had caused one of the wings to droop.

" He called his visitor's attention to this, but again Broomshaw smiled.

" ' Sir Oliver Dilke will be able to put that right. He is a great entomologist, you know, and I am going to send him this anonymously. He will be delighted '—you follow me so far, Huish ? "

" I am afraid I don't," I replied, for indeed I was completely baffled.

" This gift was intended as an instrument of death, a weapon of murder," resumed Quin solemnly. " Through being a member of the Friday Club I knew that Professor Broomshaw had become very jealous of Sir Oliver Dilke through the latter's success in the same field

of scientific research as himself. So much had this affected him that for some time I had considered the man a trifle insane—remember his amazingly brilliant conversation at the dinner last Friday, Huish.

"An insane criminal is a very dangerous person to deal with. Let me further construct the crime: Broomshaw wished Sir Oliver's death for the reason I have stated. But he was clever enough not to allow any suspicion to fall on himself. A fellow entomologist with Dilke, he self-sacrificingly sends the latter a specimen which he would have been pleased to have in his own collection. A man who wished to do this kindly act by stealth (his enmity was not generally known, I should have explained), he sent the gift anonymously.

"But he knew that Sir Oliver would recognise the prize at once and would gloat over it. He knew also that Sir Oliver would be bound to touch the damaged wing . . .

"Broomshaw arranged for the butterfly to arrive by the last post. Yes—for he had a reason. He knew that Dilke would not be going out to dinner at the Friday Club that night, and that he was a great reader. What more likely than that Sir Oliver should get down the greatest living authority on butterflies from his bookshelf to verify the specimen; that in his excitement he should forget an elementary caution and absent-mindedly wet his finger to turn the leaves of the book after the repairing of the damaged wing? As a matter of fact, the page of the book he had just turned showed faint traces upon test of the poison."

"Good God!" I cried, seeing the whole vilely-ingenious plot.

"As I have said, a shot in the dark—but you know now why Broomshaw was talking so brilliantly to you at the Friday Club dinner—his deranged brain was excited about whether his gamble had come off."

"Two questions, Quin."

"Certainly."

"Why was Matthews, the butler, so terrified when questioned about the wineglasses?"

"Because he was afraid that Hilary Croft really had poisoned his uncle."

"And who washed the clean wineglass?"

"Sir Oliver himself, no doubt. He rarely drank anything but water. He yielded to his nephew's wish to pledge their reconciliation in wine, but afterwards washed the taste away with a glass of water. . . .

"And now, I think, we will enable Hilary Croft to become free a man once more."

THE END